

AN ALTERNATIVE VIEW ON THE MACHISMO CULTURE OF  
BROWNSVILLE, TX

A Thesis

by

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## ABSTRACT

*Machismo* is a commonly practiced ideology within the borderland communities of Texas. Attached to this practice are dominating performatives that oppress Latinas and Latinos. Such practices cause the LatinX community to suppress emotions that demonstrate ‘weakness,’ a display of vulnerability. Still, as I have witnessed in my upbringing, the binaries of these entities have contradicting actions that are embodied in spaces. Additionally, these spaces which are used to embody an alternative identity allow for a temporary relief.

In this work, I investigate how the patriarchal ideology of *machismo* is more complex than what it seems. While the toxicity is obvious, there is an identity that reaches out at moments in attempt to liberate itself. I explore this notion of ‘liberation,’ along with the perception of ‘wholeness’ in a being, through the auto/ethnographic work in three separate sites of Brownsville, Texas. By exploring these sites, I argue that there is a contradiction within the *machismo* ideology, that may allow for an alternative culture, because there are cloistered spaces where these dual identities embody queer performatives. This work is pertinent because of the current fight for social justice in our communities whose aim is to obtain equal understanding and opportunity. Furthermore, while the work feeds into the study of the ambiguity of the borderlands, understanding how these spaces are used can lead to an eventual alternative culture that is liberating to all.

The sites of my work include *carnezasos* (cookouts) where Latino men embody a queer performativity, which I argue, contradicts their homophobia all while allowing them a perception of their ‘wholeness.’ Also, while exploring these contradictions, through a homosocial space, I challenge the notion of public displays of vulnerability through their ability of showing pain, sadness, and tears in this space. Next, I use the site of the church to illustrate how Latinas use this institution as a place to obtain liberation- by doing what culturally they are not allowed to, display their pain and weakness, through wailing and clamoring- and a perception of fullness. The last site of exploration is a guitar ensemble that is made up of Latinas of the working-class. This ensemble was constructed to see if any space, made with the ambition and purpose of a better culture, can be used to embody a wholeness, feel a liberation, and begin a process of rehabilitation.

Practices over time become permanent habits. How do we deconstruct those practices that have historically marginalized individuals? This is the question that I have explored. *Machismo* has had a long successful run of oppressing individuals. Through understanding these spaces, the queer performatives embodied, and the contradictions of this patriarchal system, we can begin a de/reconstructing process for a better culture.

## DEDICATION

This is dedicated to *mi madre* Maria Hernandez, *mi pareja* Jocelyn Torres, and *todas las mujeres* that have been and are of inspiration to me. Also, to all the *macho* men that have been my exemplary of hard-work and putting *la familia* first, *les dedico esto*. For all the *mijas* and *carnales* that I appreciate dearly, *a seguirle chingando*.

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## CONTRIBUTORS AND FUNDING SOURCES

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This work was supervised by a thesis committee consisting of Dr. David Afriyie Donkor, Dr. Kim Kattari of the Department of Performance Studies, and Dr. Felipe Hinojosa of the Department of History.

All other work conducted for the thesis was completed by the student independently.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Still, I Shed No Tears**

It seemed to be a night like any other on August 27, 1994 in Brownsville, Texas. The low-lit area where we lived in Southmost, between Southmost Elementary and Besteiro Middle School, was calm as usual. The occasional sound of loud engines roared from the cars that seemed to go miles above the speed limit as they rushed past our junkyard-turned-home. Off in the distance, one could hear the honks and yells of the nightlife party crowd as the wind rushed through the trees to claim their soil in the *monte* (woods) behind that junkyard-home in which we lived. My sister Windy, my *Tia* (aunt) Gorda, my cousin Meño, and myself, lay on two twin-size beds, which were passed down by a relative. We were crammed in together to allow us the illusion of having a California king-size bed. As usual, Tia Gorda, slumping at the edge of the bed as she towered over us, was telling us *cuentos de espantos* (ghost stories) to put us to sleep. These were not the usual bedtime stories you see and hear about on Disney TV, but somehow, the *cuentos* (stories) worked to put us to sleep, and for some reason we liked feeling on edge at that age. Tia Chayo also lived with us at that time, with my cousins Beto, Jimmy, and Diana, but they were already asleep on their side of the house. This night, however, is one that will remain vivid in our memories—in my memory, at least.

As we did our nightly bedtime routine, La Leona (The Lioness- nickname) walked in. I felt tense whenever I would see him. Many claimed he was a good man and it was

true in my eyes as well, in the moments that I got to spend time with him at least. Nonetheless, for two years I would not see him often. This was a man who always offered his loved ones a roof when they were in need. He would literally take the shirt off his back to give it to his friends, when the need arose, without hesitation. He always showed that he had a deep love for his kids. He was a humble man who always wanted to make sure his loved ones were taken care of and who was not afraid to take off that *macho* mask and express his doubts. Needless to say, the reason that both he and Mom connected from the very beginning of their relationship was because of the common hardships that both their mothers had experienced. If La Leona was going to send fifty dollars to his mom, he always made sure my mother's mom received the same amount. If a television were to be bought for grandma, he would make sure to send his mom one too. This was a non-materialistic man who was very hard-working and who dearly cared for people. Even so, he came to America at a very young age and always worked; he grew up and learned many, if not all of life's lessons on his own, as they came, with no one to teach him.

At the same time, La Leona was a womanizer. There was no doubt about that. He loved my mom undeniably but despite his love for her, he often went back to a woman through whom he had easy access to money and drugs. As he spoke to Mom that night, we all just sat on that old California king-size bed trying to hear what they were saying. Windy, my sister – so young and innocent – wanted to cry to him, but Tia Gorda held her back. I however, shed no tears. The mood of the room had shifted from the excitement and adrenaline that we usually obtained from the stories we would hear, to a gloomy and solemn atmosphere. Attempting to describe or recreate the scene would not do justice to

the angst my mother seem to have. To this day I am not sure of the entire dialogue of their conversation. All that remains of their discussion is what I have retained from my mom's and aunt's memory of it.

The one and only thing I recall about him from that night is his stubbornness. After finishing the conversation, my mother told La Leona to wait, that she would go with him, to the house he was staying at, in the morning to pick up his belongings because it was already too late to go that night. She told him that she had a bad feeling about him leaving our house that instant. However, true to his nature, he was going to do what he said he would. He would never let anyone tell him what to do, especially a woman. Besides, he was *macho*, and *machos* are not afraid of anything. He told my mom not to worry; he was going to get his stuff and the next day we would all be off to Florida. At four in the morning he got up, held my baby brother, Shorty, and told him that he loved him and that he was his *marranito* (little piggy). He looked for his pants in the gloomy room that seemed darker than usual and failed to find them so, instead, he grabbed one of Mom's workout shorts and, just the way he came, he left. The next day our worlds would shift dramatically.

The next day was August 28, 1994, La Leona was nowhere to be found. My Tio Chilango and mom called Brownsville PD, both hospitals, and Carrizales County jail looking for him, to no avail. Often, when La Leona could not be located, he would be found at the Police Department or county jail. Mother even called the Sheriff's department. The officer with whom she spoke casually told my mother to call back on Monday, as if a missing person's case was of no importance. I can imagine how frustrating this must have been for Mom. How do you say something like that about a person who

you were just told is missing? Perhaps in that officer's mind it was just some low-life thug that was cooped up doing crack in some drug house. At some point, she was informed that someone had been found dead in the area we lived in, but that it was probably someone who had just crossed the *rio* (river) because he had tights on, and his shirt was on backwards. They were given the number of the morgue where his body had been put. Mom left a description of him with the people at the morgue and was told she would be contacted if the found body fit the description.

When Mom returned to the house, we, the kids were inside. However, Tia Chayo was outside, sitting on the naked ground that used to be the driveway for customers when the place was a junkyard. She was crying. Mother knew. Tia did not have to say anything. From inside the house we heard a scream of agony, "*No, no, no! No esta muerto!*" (No, no, no! He is not dead!). In one instant, I went from watching the lazy images illuminated on the television to hearing Mom yell, and I was up on my feet in a heartbeat. I felt an amalgam of emotions, so many that I became numb, perhaps shocked. "Dead?! What?! No, we are supposed to be leaving for Florida. Maybe he left ahead of us," I thought. I paced back and forth in the space between the TV, which was on a stand made from pieces of wood that we found in the junkyard and nailed together, and the corner of the wall. I believe that my pacing, which I unconsciously do now as an adult, might have its source in this moment. Next, I remember hearing my mom yell to my aunt to please watch over us as she ran out the door, got in Tio Chilango's car in a frenzy and disappeared into the darkness of that infamous Southmost street.

La Southmost, when I was growing up in this area, was a street that curved so much that some called it *la curva del diablo* (the Devil's curve). Many accidents seemed to occur there because of the darkness, the acute angle of the curve (which has been fixed since then), and the speeding of the drunk drivers. Nearby was La Posada, a street adjacent to La Southmost, known for its gang activity, violence, and drugs. It was common also to hear about fatal incidents on the La Posada. This night was different however, the fatality involved both places. "*Diosito vino por el, mis perritos*" (God came for him, my pups), Tia Gorda told us. After hearing this I went to bed, closed my eyes to sleep, and let my mind tell me that I was dreaming. Still, I shed no tears.

It turns out that, La Leona, my dad, had come clean to my mom about the last two years. He confessed that a woman from La Posada, who he fulfilled his sexual desires with, threatened him by telling him she would kill his family if he left her. This time, his sexual desires, drunkenness, and vices caused him to get involved with the wrong woman. This was a woman involved in the distribution of drugs from Mexico to the US in those times, before all the public media reproductions of cartel violence in the 2000s. One could refer to her as a shot caller. I think that La Leona, a shrimper by career, saw that it would be easy to get with her for an easy fix. Thinking with this mind, he got involved with the woman and, it seems, reaped what he sowed. To this day I believe that he knew what was coming. Maybe I just tell myself this, but his stubbornness was obvious even to me on the night of his visit. I believe that he wanted to make peace and bid his real love and his kids goodbye. My mom always did paint a picture of him with the best of colors, so this is why I believe he went that night.

On August 31, 1994 we buried La Leona at Santa Rosalia Cemetery. Today, this cemetery is on the other side of the US-Mexico border fence that has cut across many local's properties. Back then, we had to go over a *caliche* hill and drive down the gravel road near the *rio* (river) to get to the spot. As we arrived at the cemetery, I could hear the yells and cries of devastation from my little sister and my mom at the front of the car. I can recall people wailing in sadness, crying in anguish. It was a chaotic scene. Sitting in the back of my Tio Chilango's old Lincoln, I could only observe the chaos. But for me...still, no tears. Many people were there—he was loved by many. The good man that people say he was seemed apparent at his burial. All of his shrimping comrades were there. La Macarena, his best friend, cried so much that he could not stand; he had also spent the whole night crying and drinking at the church, so that he overslept and almost missed the burial. His only words were, “*Ay Leona, chingado, te nos fuiste*” (Geez Leona, dammit, you have left us).

I just stood, leaning against a tombstone. I watched them pray and pay their last respects to La Leona right before he was lowered down into that 6-foot-deep hole. I still could not cry. I watched my mom almost throw herself into the burial hole when they began laying him in his final resting place. Soon after, she fainted and my Tio Chilango grabbed her and put her in the car. The chaos seemed to get more intense the moment they began to shovel the dirt into the grave. Still, no tears from me. Moments later, I heard my sister yelling, “*Noooo, porque lo estan metiendo al hoyo a mi papi*” (Why are they putting my daddy into the hole). Like mother, Windy tried throwing herself into that sacred hole. My uncle rushed at her and picked her up with his right arm while he looked around for

me with both his gaze and pointing left hand moving in sync. He locked eyes with me, walked to me and told me to grab my sister. He seemed so huge, and I felt so small. His words to me were:

*Mira Hector, cuida a tu hermana y no la dejes ir. No lo quiero ver llorar, ¿me entiende? Ahora usted es el hombre de la casa, y los hombres no lloran. Nosotros protegemos, y no los amarramos.* (Look Hector, take care of your sister and do not let her go. I do not want to see you crying, you understand? You are now the man of the house, and men do not cry. We protect, and we tie them up.)

My uncle's words at La Leona's funeral, which still resonate with me to this day, are a big part of the reason why I conducted this research. At the time, I did not know what he meant. All I knew was that at just five years old, I had now become the man of the house and a father to my sister and brother. I asked myself, "What does 'be a man' even mean?" I wondered. "What does '*se los amarran*' mean?" In fact, the questions driving this research are to a large extent those prompted by my memories of the life and death of La Leona. Why, if they are so caring, and often hold their women to a standard of sainthood, do Latino men often reject their partners/spouses as lovers? What internal and subconscious issues do Latino men suppress which do not allow them to rid themselves of these hegemonic, toxic masculinities to create an alternative *macho* for themselves? What possibilities might there be for constructing an alternative view of the Latino *Macho* and, concomitantly, of my own sense of masculinity? Following my uncle's words, I held on to my sister as tight as I could and stared at the pile of dirt, which got smaller and

smaller as it was lifted and thrown into the burial hole to claim its place. Still, I shed no tears.

### **Mi Comunidad/My Community**

People in my community—the Latino communities in the Rio Grande Valley, particularly those in the lower socio-economic stratum of the society, are socialized usually through the daily performances of cultural traditional forms. Men learn from their fathers, as boys, that they have their own roles and expected behavior: men provide and protect; they do not cry, they act *macho*. As young girls, many women also learn from their mothers that there are certain roles they must fulfill. Still, in my experiences within my community, the cultural expectation is that both men and women refrain from crying publicly. This is because the community sees tears as a public display of weakness and expects both men and women to avoid such show of weakness by bearing, without tears, the harshness of the social-economic condition that weigh-in on them day to day.

Still, like myself, some men in my community learn that one can be supportive and at the same time masculine and *macho*. Nevertheless, my own lived experiences, as well as work such as Gloria Anzaldua's "Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza," demonstrate that this patriarchal *machismo* ideology creates a toxic environment for both women and men of the Latino community.

My argument then, is that there are cloistered spaces in which dual identities embody queer performatives. In significance, after analyzing and understanding these explicit spaces I suspect that we may begin to apply tools of cultural rehabilitation. Furthermore, I suggest that to alter such toxic cycles, we need to first understand how



some of these communities are complicit to this patriarchy because of social class, economic class, and religious beliefs. Therefore, to create an alternative culture we need not necessarily to attack *machismo* to eradicate it but begin by understanding the contradictions of this ideology to work on creating an alternative culture. While ideally many will claim that we should get rid of *machismo*, I argue that thinking in this manner is utopic. How do we create a better culture ‘now’ to eventually reach that utopia? This question is what I explored, while also, attempting to understand my own culture, my identity as a *macho* from Brownsville, Texas.

### **Developing a Language**

Bringing up questions, which challenge everything I thought I understood about my culture’s sense of what makes a woman and a man, has, and is to this point, a challenging task. While experiencing many challenges, that relate to poverty and *machismo* in my upbringing, I would never like to condemn the abilities of those that provided and nurtured me growing up. Needless to say, I have witnessed how both women and men use and create spaces in which they embody performatives that are contradictory to what is practiced in everyday life. I always wondered why these inconsistent acts that did not seem part of the tradition were still very much the common, even if only at specific times. Moreover, like many other scholars who study cultural performatives, I have obtained a sense of language in which I can now interrogate what I believe to be toxic cultural relations without feeling so much as if I am glaring at my community with shame and disgust. While I believe that much may be done to create an alternative culture for the

community which I come from, and which I have also based this research on, I have explored the contradicting performatives, that both women and men do, to understand how certain forms of expressions give some sense of liberation; of fullness to the individual.

It has been interesting to learn how anecdotes concerning *machismo* do in fact vary from place to place. After discussing *machismo* with family members, friends, acquaintances, and colleagues, and gathering an understanding of how everyone has their own take on the said identity, I can see the challenge that comes with using the language of *machismo*. In his essay, “The Dialogic Imagination,” Mikhail Bakhtin states that “no living word relates to its object in a *singular* way: between the word and its object, between the word and the speaking subject, there exists an elastic environment of other, alien words about the same object, the same theme, and this is an environment that it is often difficult to penetrate.”<sup>1</sup> Having experienced *machismo* differently from relatives in Mexico, California, and other cities of Texas, I see how the performance of this ideology varies spatially - considering these lived experiences can be restricting and challenging in making certain arguments, which is why I have focused the site of this work on my community in Brownsville, Texas.

Furthermore, to understand how to discuss ideologies like *machismo* and how to deal with my input as a man when referring to the experiences of the marginalized within the marginalized- Latinas-, I have had to study feminist works to understand how I may apply my voice without imposing patriarchal oppressions. Also, I needed to be cautious

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<sup>1</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, (Austin, The University of Texas Press, 1981) 276.

and avoid giving either the female or male identities validation which would seem to make one superior to the other. In their book, *A Dialogue of Voices: Feminist Literary Theory and Bakhtin*, Karen Hohne and Helen Wussow create a dialogue between Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts of 'heteroglossia' and 'chronotope' in a collection of essays, which in turn allows for an understanding, and perhaps even guidelines, on feminine *écriture*.<sup>2</sup> Each essay in the book makes connections to Bakhtin's concepts; some connections are used to show the possibilities of using male literature for feminine writing, while other connections are used to show the consequences that arise from using the male voice in feminine discourse. Hohne and Wussow explain how oftentimes "critics point to the dangers of taking on the voice or the theory of any male critic, including Bakhtin" because in writing about theories and languages which were developed by men, they often find their "own voices drowned out" by the authors of 'male languages.'<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, the authors argue that it would be static to reject the philosophies of Bakhtin, or others alike, because it is suggesting that "gender determines all that one is" and that this experience of gender is "purely masculine or purely feminine," in turn making it monologic and not "a process" or "a becoming."<sup>4</sup> They also state that although Bakhtin's form and style of writing, such as the language and "rule-breaking word inventions," does not focus on 'gendrified language,' it can be used as a guide in feminine literature.

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<sup>2</sup> Karen Hohne and Helen Wussow, *A Dialogue of Voices: Feminist Literary Theory and Bakhtin*, (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> Hohne and Wussow, *A Dialogue of Voices*, viii.

<sup>4</sup> Hohne and Wussow, viii.

In exploring the discourse of ‘patriarchal’ concepts such as that of *machismo*, and giving the female gender a ‘voice,’ I need to consider the arguments that Hohne and Wussow have presented; I must be inclusionary all while accounting for my own male voice. They state that feminist authors Bauer and Ann Herrmann believe that “feminist dialogics would disrupt patriarchal hierarchy.”<sup>5</sup> But what effect is there, if such dialogics are inscribed by the ‘oppressor’? In considering the dangers of such writing, and the carnivalesque tendencies that *machismo* creates such as superior/inferior, oppressor/oppressed, free/tied-down, and male/female, I can structure my argument around the dualities of these feminine and masculine entities to explore their contradicting performatives that allow for temporary liberation.

### **Understanding Wholeness in the Person**

David T. Abalos discusses the notion of ‘wholeness’ in the Latino communities. In his book, *The Latino Male: A Radical Redefinition*, he describes the mentioned concept in terms creating whole beings through understanding both aspects of an identity, the feminine and masculine. Furthermore, Abalos attacks those critical issues that Latino men face to provide solutions and demonstrate “how they can create alternative stories that enable them to transform their lives.”<sup>6</sup> To attack these issues, which keep the destructive traditions in the Latino community alive, we need to first understand what has been

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<sup>5</sup> Hohne and Wussow, ix.

<sup>6</sup> David T. Abalos, *The Latino Male: A Radical Redefinition*, (Boulder, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002) 2.

repressed and how and if they are expressed. Abalos explains that the loving and compassionate male has been dominated over by the structures of U.S. society and the historical social construction of what masculinity should be. Still, while the nurturing male has been repressed, it has not been lost. While Abalos explains how understanding the erotic male might bring us to ‘wholeness’ because they are “always open to new ideas, new feelings, new strategies,” and, he offers examples of how this eroticism may be applied for comprehension, I have applied this notion to specific experiences which I have witnessed in my upbringing.<sup>7</sup>

In this work I have had to critically question how homophobia is a mirror to the homoerotic performatives within my community. In other words, in understanding Abalos’ concepts of wholeness and eroticism, I have decided to look at the performatives that contradict the homophobia of the *macho* in Brownsville, Texas. Therefore, beyond Abalos’ purpose of giving solutions, I am exploring the homoerotic tendencies, and displays of vulnerability, that occur in the spaces that these Latino men of Brownsville create for themselves. To understand how these spaces are used to embody wholeness through such nonnormative performatives I also applied Jose Muñoz’s understanding of ‘utopic performatives.’

In his *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, Muñoz describes utopia as a “flux, a temporal disorganization, as a moment when the here and the now is

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<sup>7</sup> Abalos, *The Latino Male*, 40.

transcended by a *then* and a *there* that could be and indeed should be.”<sup>8</sup> By exploring spaces which are constructed by the community of my research I am hoping that I can understand the contradicting performatives as the ‘here and now’ which can transcend into what an alternative culture could be, whole. Furthermore, Muñoz describes that a “stage” can be referred to as a phase but also a space in which utopic performatives may be enacted.<sup>9</sup> Still, as Muñoz “considers the idea of queerness as a “stage”” to “manage and contain the potentiality that is queer” through utopian performatives in the Punk Rock scene/clubs, I apply queerness as an analytical verb and a tool of exploring the repressed which is expressed in constructed spaces.<sup>10</sup> In other words, while Muñoz’s work aims to understand the utopic potentiality of the “queer child,” I use queerness to explore the performatives that contradict the homophobia of the Brownsville *macho* to cultivate a potentiality of what should be.<sup>11</sup>

Additionally, while I explore wholeness through the ambiguous behaviors of the *macho*, I also look at how the Latinas in my community use the church to express the repressed. In exploring the Latinas performatives within the church to understand how they reach wholeness; I have also attached Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz’s concept of *mujerista* theology. Isasi-Diaz states that the latter concept is a process for ‘liberation-fullness of life’ that requires satisfying needs as much as wants.<sup>12</sup> Even so, while understanding that

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<sup>8</sup> Jose Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, (New York, New York University Press, 2009) 97.

<sup>9</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 98.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, *En La Lucha/In the Struggle: Elaborating a Mujerista Theology*, (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2004) 4.

fulfilling the needs and wants of the Latina through religion to reach fullness, Isasi-Diaz states that the church is also a means of survival for the body, mind, and spirit in the intersections of everyday life oppressive influences. Nonetheless, while Isasi-Diaz notes that this survival means is what makes Latinas use religion to obtain a sense of fullness of life, and that the oppressive practices towards these women influences their ‘acceptance’ of their marginalization, I argue that social and economic structures makes the people of the LatinX community to be complicit with such patriarchal ideologies.<sup>13</sup>

Therefore, while exploring the use of the patriarchal space within the church I use Michell De Certeau’s notion of strategies and tactics. I use De Certeau’s stated concepts to analyze the ways in which institutions- the church- use strategies to “assume a place that can be circumscribed as proper” thus generating a space of control and power which is “concealed beneath objectives.”<sup>14</sup> Such institutions like the church, create a ‘proper’ place of sacredness that disables the ability of ‘question’ from its congregation. Since the divine is all right and just, the members cannot challenge the power that the institution has victoriously gained. Nonetheless, while the church has gained its power, and therefore is the proper, tactics are used by the other to obtain temporary victories. De Certeau explains that tactics are attached to the other and that their use is based on opportunities that have to be gained upon their availability.<sup>15</sup> Still, while the use of tactics allows the other to obtain victories against the proper, these triumphs are never permanent, they are temporary

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<sup>13</sup> Isasi-Diaz, *En La Lucha*, 3.

<sup>14</sup> Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, (Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1984) xix, xx.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, xix.

successes.<sup>16</sup> Nonetheless, the church allows for a liberation of the being from its cultural ties through the use of tactics against the strategies imposed onto the other. The use of tactics will be used here to understand the way the space of the church is used to enact utopic performatives as tactics against the culture within my community.

### **Constructing Space**

The application of the stated concepts above has allowed me to critically interrogate the ambiguous performatives that are enacted in certain spaces. Therefore, to further understand how spaces can be used to embody a utopic wholeness, I created a guitar ensemble that was made up of Latinas from the lower working class. The purpose of this ensemble is to see how Latinas can use the guitar as a tool of empowerment all while obtaining a perception of social support and self-proclaimed agency through the group. Needless to say, while the whole work focuses on both the feminine and masculine aspects of my culture, I have strictly worked with women in this ensemble because I feel it will allow me to further understand my masculinity, and eventually, how to embody my wholeness.

The guitar ensemble is framed around guitar pedagogy and Participatory action research (PAR). This type of research is a methodology that allows the observed/studied to be co-authors of a research. Furthermore, this approach in the ensemble creates a safe space where opinions and suggestions are openly discussed. Even so, this methodology is

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.



one that illustrates the ways to “create alternate spaces whereby co-researchers enjoy new parts of themselves and new forms of relationships with each other, experiences that often run counter to traditional social hierarchies.”<sup>17</sup> This procedure allowed me to be transparent with the group and gave a space where traumatic experiences were discussed as a transformative process.

The ensemble began all rehearsals with discussions that were guided by their daily experiences of work, family, religion, and *machismo* experiences. This transformation and conscious was developed through a series of individual interviews, which I like to consider conversations, and group talks. The group talk was done every rehearsal day, while the individual conversations were done at a time and place of their choosing.

While on the research side I conducted conversations that allowed for taboo topics to surface, as a guitar instructor I wanted to demonstrate to this group that age and financial status should not be a factor in obtaining the beautiful language of music. Therefore, the lessons were divided into learning folk songs of Mexico and music literature to both, attach an ancestral theme to the lessons and stimulate perceptions of empowerment by learning a new language-music. To collect all the data I could I developed notes from participant-observation through the recording of rehearsal, conversations, and performances; this allowed me to continually revisit the group’s space.

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<sup>17</sup> Jennifer Ayala, Julio Cammarota, Margarita I. Berta-Avila, Melissa Rivera, Louie F. Rodriguez, and Maria Elena Torres, *PAR EntreMundos: A Pedagogy of the Americas*, (New York, Peter Lang, 2018).

## Exploring Wholeness

I will divide the thesis into two sections. The first part will comprise of chapters two and three, where the focus is on the ambiguous and contradicting performatives that Latinas/os embody in certain spaces of Brownsville. In this first part, I will explore the oppressive ideologies and performances in these Latino communities based on the concept of *machismo*, within the people that surrounded me in my upbringing. I will establish that these two identities are more complex than gender specific entities or false binaries. In other words, each of the concepts explored can apply to either the female or male gender. In the second part of the thesis, which comprises of chapter four, I will focus on the positive influence music has on individuals' well-being in general, but especially in the Latino community. In this, I will discuss the impact of the musical pedagogical approach that I use with a Latino women's community in the ethnographic field work towards my thesis.

Chapter two will explore the queerness of the Brownsville, Texas *macho*. The economic and social oppression that occurs in Latino communities in the South Texas region, best described as *The Valley*, is the main context of my study. The chapter will explore the social construction of *machismo* by examining specific events that I have experienced with the men that I grew up with. The focus here will be an attempt to explore the effects that concepts within said ideology, such as homophobia and displays of weakness, have on the men I will discuss. In exploring this, I will address the contradictions of these performatives and what it means to be *macho*, but only as a way of explaining these rather ambiguous features of *machismo*. How do the politics of *machismo*

enable or (dis)able a person? By addressing these questions, I will demonstrate in this chapter that the concept of *machismo*, which is expressed in the ritualistic practice of everyday social interactions, is itself a contradiction all its own.

The third chapter will discuss how religion limits women within the possibility of being fully liberated. Nonetheless, I will show how women use the spaces within the church as a way to protest and resist ideological expectations. Here, I will focus on how the women I grew up with are not allowed to show weakness in public. Furthermore, I will demonstrate how Latinas navigate the spaces within their church, to reinforce my argument of how the spaces within the church are used as places where performatives that are nonculturally the norm become unquestioned, thus creating a space for the ambiguous identities to be embodied. In other words, I will explore how liberation and wholeness is achieved by the use of space to perform acts that are culturally unacceptable.

Chapter four will explore the connection between the fine arts, specifically guitar ensembles, and Latino women's perception of empowerment. Historically, the social expectation is that most women in this area would be 'stay-at-home' parents. However, there are many women who do not want to be limited to this role. My ethnographic interactions with local women in Brownsville, Texas will help me demonstrate how Latino women can use art, and especially music, to simultaneously resist and embrace this socially assigned role. A key question I will address within this chapter is whether or not these women are feeling liberated and/or empowered, and if so, how?

In the concluding chapter I will revisit the narratives which described the experiences of the members of my family and community. My purpose with this

conclusion is to connect the ideas I posed about a more complex view on *machismo* because of the contradicting acts that counter the ideologies of the Brownsville, Texas community.

## CHAPTER II

### QUEERING THE MACHO OF BROWNSVILLE, TEXAS

*Today, I am not who you think I am; I am not who I think I am; I am who I think you think I am.*

- Charles Cooley

Around 6:00pm during the first week of the summer vacation of 2004, El Jefe and I were cruising down 14th Street in Brownsville, Texas.<sup>18</sup> At midnight I would be turning fifteen and El Jefe knew this. Jokingly, and with laughter, he asked, “¿*Que, te van a hacer quinceañera?*” (What, are you going to have a *quinceañera*?).<sup>19</sup> I quickly replied with a ‘manly’ no. “*No se crea mijo, bromeo,*” (I am kidding) he said. We were on our way to pick up one of his friends, El Compi. I felt “cool” hanging out with big fellas like him instead of kids my age back then, for these were the men who had become my father figures in my dad’s absence.

As we drove down 14th Street, a road that leads to downtown Brownsville, El Jefe told me that this is where all the *prostiputas* (sex workers) operate.<sup>20</sup> I already knew that—most people from Brownsville did—but I just smiled and nodded in acknowledgment as we drove past the old infrastructure of the *cantinas*, where the working-class men of the Latino community go to unwind and drink *unas bien frias* (some cold ones). I wondered if I was going to end up in a place like that, where all the tired looking *paisas* (slang for

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<sup>18</sup> Jefe is commonly used in the Brownsville, Texas area to refer to an elder, boss, or father.

<sup>19</sup> A quinceanera is a rite of passage for young ladies at the age of fifteen in Latino communities that transitions them into womanhood.

<sup>20</sup> The correct term is *prostituta*, however, *prostiputa* is the way El Jefe would say it.

worker) went, when I became an adult. It was time for the regular bunch of night owls, but I felt as though I fit right in because I was with El Jefe. He kept telling me of his experiences with the women he met at these *cantinas* (bar) and the fights he almost got into because of some other *bato* (dude) that disrespected him. “Man,” I thought, “this guy is incredible. I want to be as *macho* as he is one day.”

We stopped at a traffic light and as we kept on with our conversation, we heard someone say, “*¿Hola papi, que buscas?*” (Hi daddy, what are you looking for?). We both turned and saw a trans-woman dressed in an all-black sparkly dress, with what looked like a wig on her head and black high heels on her feet. I was shocked; this was my first encounter of any type with a trans-woman, and so to me, it felt out of the ordinary. I suspect that El Jefe felt the same because he furiously exclaimed, “*Otra vez estos pinches puñetas*” (Again, these fucking faggots). He quickly turned the corner, got out, and told me to wait in the car. I watched him quickly pace towards this woman and got frightened. “Is he going to kill her?! Is he going to beat the gay out of her?!” I wondered then. I remember hearing El Jefe yelling at this woman, “*¿Que tienes pendejo?*” (What is wrong with you, dumbass?) The woman’s next move, which I assume she made to ease the tension, was a mistake. She rolled her finger down El Jefe’s chest and told him that nothing was wrong, that it was okay. This was reason enough in El Jefe’s mind for him to do what came next. He pushed her to the ground, punched, kicked, and finally spat on her.

As I watched El Jefe, I wondered, “Why was that necessary? What was so wrong about that woman on that corner? She was trying to make a living and all he had to say was, ‘No, thank you.’” However, I also thought to myself, “Why am I questioning El

Jefe's actions? He is the manliest man I know, and you do not question a *macho*." As he got back into his Dodge Caravan, I kept quiet for fear that he would do or say something to me too out of rage. Nevertheless, the moment we drove off he got quite calm. "*Pobre vato*" (poor guy) he said, "*Pero aquí no andamos con joterías*," (but we are not being gay around here) he asserted, as if being gay was just an act, a performance. Why did he feel guilt first, and then justify it with such a display of hypermasculinity? Was it because he was trying to cope with insecurities about his *macho-ness*? Was this a case of compensatory masculinity?<sup>21</sup> Did any show of compassion or sympathy make him feel complicit in the homosexual desire? Reflecting on this instance of how El Jefe demonstrated a temporary sentiment of compassion, illustrates the need that these *machos* have for a space where they may embody their vulnerability. I remember not saying much after the incident. We got to the cantina where El Compi was, picked him up and drove to El Jefe's residence.

### **El Jefe y Su Homofobia/El Jefe and His Homophobia**

My own interest in developing a better understanding of Latino masculinity is rooted in the questions I had after the incident with El Jefe—and other experiences similar to that one— on 14<sup>th</sup> Street. In 2002 - a couple of years before the incident on 14<sup>th</sup> Street

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<sup>21</sup> Compensatory masculinity refers to the how men compensate for their manliness in situations where a threat of creating a less than manly image presents itself. To read more on it: James D. Babl, *Compensatory masculine responding as a function of sex role*. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, (1979). 47(2), 252-257.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0022-006X.47.2.252>

- David T. Abalos published his work *The Latino Male: A Radical Redefinition*, a revelatory narrative that considers an alternative to prevailing views of the Latino male. Abalos' attempt to describe the 'whole human' by conceiving the Latina/o person in both feminine and masculine terms, very much informs the research in this and subsequent chapters.<sup>22</sup> Abalos notes that both, the feminine and masculine, have become a "distortion only as opposites" through the long battle of patriarchal dominance.<sup>23</sup> Nonetheless, "they can remain in a potentially creative tension that may result in wholeness."<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, he adds that the historical ideology of dominance has hindered women and men from experiencing, not only the "impoverished concrete manifestations of the masculine," but also that, "all humans [are and] were deprived of the experience of the feminine ground of our being."<sup>25</sup> Consequently, this constructed notion of power over the 'weak,' woman and impoverished male, has wounded the LatinX community and obstructed the ability of experiencing 'wholeness.'

In Abalos' autoethnographic narrative he explores theories of transformation to offer not only a different perspective of the LatinX community, but also solutions for creating a new *comunidad Latina*.<sup>26</sup> To shed light on the duality of the masculine and its relation to *machismo* he explains that many of these men romanticize a fictional

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<sup>22</sup> Abalos, *The Latino Male: A Radical Redefinition* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2002) 7.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Abalos, *The Latino Male*, 8.

<sup>26</sup> Abalos, *The Latino Male*, 7. The first chapter of this book opened my eyes to comprehend the doubts and fears of the Latino male. It is a brilliant analysis of rediscovery.



dominating figure which creates in them what he calls the “disappointed male.” In Abalos’ words, Latino men

live the story of the disappointed male. They hang on to this fragment of life, a wounded masculinity, in order to have a sense of power and find ways to get even with a society that daily turns them into objects. The response to this dilemma has been the story of patriarchal machismo. Machismo is Latino men’s inherited understanding of being in charge, of taking command, *un hombre muy macho*.<sup>27</sup>

I see El Jefe, who saw the trans-woman as a mere *puñeta* and felt the only way he could assert his own masculinity was to dominate over another person, as an embodiment of Abalos’ idea of the “disappointed male.” As Abalos further explains, the disappointed male is “burdened with a specific masculine interpretation that permeates our language.”<sup>28</sup> Similarly, El Jefe compensates for his own disappointment with a violent assertion that blurs his capacity to understand either his or the trans-woman’s humanity in their entirety. For Abalos, understanding the wholeness of one’s humanity means to accept both the feminine and masculine aspects of our identities no matter what gender by which we identify.

In this chapter I use Abalos’ idea of creating a whole human, and his insight about “the disappointed male” to explore what Jose Muñoz refers to as “utopian performatives,” among El Jefe and his comrades.<sup>29</sup> Through these concepts and from my own ethnographic work I explore and explain the queerness of the liminal spaces that Brownsville, Texas

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<sup>27</sup> Abalos, *The Latino Male*, 3.

<sup>28</sup> Abalos, *The Latino Male*, 7.

<sup>29</sup> Muñoz, Jose. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. (New York: New York, 2009).

*machos* create for themselves.’ Like Abalos, I am interested in wholeness in how there are certain parts that we suppress that do not allow us to be whole. Such repressions are described in Abalos’ work when he claims that “[e]roticism is the pleasure that comes with connecting the previously unknown to the knower, who in that creative, erotic moment loses control and plays with risk and openness, becomes vulnerable.”<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, in experiencing the erotic the man is “ready to risk his personal and political being so that he can bring about a new turning point in the history.”<sup>31</sup> This eroticism, and display of vulnerability, is what I am exploring with El Jefe and his comrades of Brownsville, Texas to understand the repressed persona that allows these men to risk being open to nonconforming acts. Needless to say, like Abalos for whom the feminine and masculine is needed to be whole, I look at any aspect that we socially repress and how in certain spaces we express oppressed identities through the analysis of the queer performatives that happen in specific spaces.

Also, like Muñoz, whose work is an attempt at furthering queer studies and the affect of queerness and its utopian performativity, I use the term ‘queer’ as an analytic verb that “allows ambiguities, contradictions, and fluctuations to coexist.”<sup>32</sup> In his ancestral autobiographical performance, *Purple Eyes*, Josh Inocencio explores his queer Chicano identity in the thick of his family’s *machismo* practice. In Inocencio’s solo

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<sup>30</sup> Abalos, 40.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Muñoz, Jose. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. (New York: New York, 2009). Also for a better understanding of queerness as a verb read, Perez, Daniel Enrique. *Rethinking Chicana/o and Latina/o Popular Culture: Introduction*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

performance, he states that his father is a heterosexual man. Nonetheless, as he embodies his father's identity, through his performance, to show a straight 'pocho' (term used in Mexico to refer to Chicanos and/or those who lack fluency in Spanish) enacting a queer performance when dealing with undercover work in a gay night club, he notes that his father dressed as a woman during these detective jobs.<sup>33</sup> While the undercover work necessitated the use of woman's clothing, the queer performative done by his 'straight pocho' father is what Inocencio is looking at to explore his own identity. These performatives, like that of Inocencio's father, along with the repressed eroticism, and Jose Muñoz's utopic stages, provide an understanding of how the Brownsville *macho* creates safe spaces in which wholeness may be embodied.

I will draw from the binary heritage of the mestizo identity to frame my analysis. This binary is on one hand the indigenous male who was stripped of his manhood and was left on what has now become the "wrong side" of the border, and on the other hand, the Spanish that conquered and emasculated the indigenous to remain on the "right side" of the border. I am interested in analyzing how colonial and other kinds of oppression shapes the LatinX identity and compels them to create safe spaces where the embodiment of queer utopic performatives can occur, as Muñoz discusses.

In addition to colonialism, I will in this chapter, look at how people in the borderlands of South Texas, are complicit to *machismo* because of the socio-economic status and people's religious beliefs - something I address fully in the next chapter.

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<sup>33</sup> Josh Inocencio, *Purple Eyes Solo-Performance*, 2018.

Drawing from Jose Limon's critical understanding of how the lower-class Latino male interacts in spaces, where women are excluded, to analyze the queerness of the *macho* that *El Jefe* and his *compadres* embodied.<sup>34</sup> While Limon, in his chapter "*Carne, Carnales, and the Carnavalesque: Bakhtinian "batos," Disorder, and Narrative Discourses*," looks at dominating power expressed through the use of language, specifically *albur*, he illuminates the reader on the fact that these forms of expressions, within marginalized and unemployed classes, "constitute a body politic symbolically conscious of its socially penetrable status."<sup>35</sup> In other words, in analyzing the use of such forms of expressions we can expand on the understanding of how these lower working class men use outlets such as *carnezasos* to alleviate themselves from the harsh conditions of American culture.

### **El Jefe y Los Amigos/El Jefe and His Friends**

Later that night, when we arrived at El Jefe's home, where the neighbors were already waiting for us, his wife Doña Magda asked him where he had been. Quickly he replied, "*Fui por El Compi, mija*" (I picked up El Compi, darling). That night they were going to have a *Carne asada* or *carnesazo* (cookout), a gathering that happens frequently—sometimes every weekend—in the Brownsville communities and that are meant for the whole family. Doña Magda told El Jefe to start lighting up the *asador* (grill) for the cookout. Once she was out of sight, El Compi, laughingly and nearly spilling his

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<sup>34</sup> Limon, Jose, *Dancing with the Devil: Society and Cultural Poetics in Mexican-American South Texas*. (Madison: The University of Wisconsin, 1994) 476.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

beer, told El Jefe, “*Te pegan cabrón*” (you get spanked bro). As he said so, he waved his right hand, palm up and parallel to ground from left to right, a common gesture that is often made, within this community, to signify a spanking or whooping. “*Uyuyuy, el burro hablando de orejas*” (Uyuyuy, the donkey speaks about ears) said El Jefe to Compi, his way of bypassing the latter’s comment without dismissing it.<sup>36</sup> As Doña Magda prepared the food with the other women for the *carne asada* that we were going to have, and the children ran around playing *migra y mojado* (ICE and wetback), the men ‘*preparaban el bote*’ (prepared the grill) and drank *unos mofles* (tall boys). Meanwhile, the night went on as if the outside social-economic difficulties that these men usually face did not exist. People began to serve themselves whatever food they pleased. As usual the children and women ate first. The men would eat later, after they were done drinking. The more these men drank the more playful they became with each other.

In their interaction with each other, the men performed *albur*, a Mexican, lower class, mostly male verbal act in which participants use double entendre to engage in sexually loaded speech. It involves playful and competitive domination in which male friends become playful satirical lovers. As Octavio Paz explains

Each of the speakers tries to humiliate his adversary with verbal traps and ingenious linguistic combinations, and the loser is the person who cannot think of a comeback, who has to swallow his opponent’s jibes. These jibes are full of aggressive sexual allusions;

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<sup>36</sup>It is a saying often used in these Latino communities.

the loser is possessed, is violated, by the winner, and the spectators laugh and sneer at him.<sup>37</sup>

Using *albur*, the men at El Jefe's *carnesazo* teased each other while making sexual body gestures that demonstrated their playful eroticism.<sup>38</sup> In one instance, El Jefe asked El Compadre, another one of his friends, "*¿Quieres un taco de carne?*" (You want a meat taco?). As he asked this, he held the tortilla in one hand and grabbed his crotch with the other implying it was the meat that the taco would have. El Compadre, bending over and looking at his rear replied, "*Te presto este taco pa tu carne*" (I will lend you this taco for your meat).

Observing their interaction, I recalled the woman that El Jefe had humiliated several hours earlier. Why was it okay for him to behave this way with his friends but damn other people for such behavior? Was it because they were friends and the transsexual woman was a stranger? What internal struggles caused these men to be homoerotic with each other in these cookout spaces but not in other spaces? Why did they speak with each other about women as if the latter were objects, but in the women's faces, treat them like queens? Whatever *macho* or masculinity was, I found it more confusing as I observed the men's behavior. However, now I recall the moment with a more complex understanding.

Limon discusses these acts of *albur*, such as those acts of El Jefe and his friends, as exertions of dominance. These acts mirror the penetration that society brings onto these

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<sup>37</sup> Jose Limon, *Dancing with the Devil*, 127.

<sup>38</sup> Playing with words to create sexual double entendre. Many times this is used along with body movements.

men by using the space, of *carne asadas*, as a place where they can enact their own dominance by ‘screwing’ each other.<sup>39</sup> Even more, these acts within these spaces of the cookouts are not considered ‘gay’ because the one who gets screwed is considered effeminate and powerless, and therefore, the *albur* and playful homoerotic acts reaffirm the homophobia that these men have. Nonetheless, can these spaces, where dominance over the other is occurring, be challenged, and perhaps considered a utopic place where “suppressed desires” are being enacted?<sup>40</sup>

Furthermore, I take into account the potential connections between a history of Spanish colonial subjugation and anxieties surrounding public homoeroticism. Before the Spanish conquests of the Aztec natives some tribes made a distinction in feminine and masculine roles but, mostly, gender distinctions were nonexistent. One Aztec God was Xochipilli, the Lord of Flowers.<sup>41</sup> This god was also related to homosexuality and believed to have gained these ideologies from the Toltec civilization, a predecessor to the Aztecs.<sup>42</sup> The natives not only worshiped this god but embodied its identity. In another example, during the interactions between the Cempoal people and Cortes, the Cempoal leader offered the finest young Cempoal women to the Spanish elite families.<sup>43</sup> Nonetheless, before Cortes would accept this offering there were certain things the natives had to

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<sup>39</sup> Limon, Jose, *Dancing with the Devil: Society and Cultural Poetics in Mexican-American South Texas*. (Madison: The University of Wisconsin, 1994) 476.

<sup>40</sup> Donkor, David Afriyie, *Spiders of the Market: Ghanaian Trickster Performance in a Web of Neoliberalism*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 2016) 72.

<sup>41</sup> David F. Greenberg, *The Construction of Homosexuality*, (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1988) 165.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Alfredo Mirande, *Hombres y Machos: Masculinity and Latino Culture*, (New York, Routledge, 2018) 33.

renounce. Among these were ceasing sacrificial offerings, idolatrous practices, and sodomy.<sup>44</sup> When El Jefe grabbed his *huevos* (testicles) as if they were meat for El Compadre, he was playfully performing dominance. However, such overexertion of masculinity, as Mirande states, is a “camouflage by which he [the *macho*] misleads himself and all those who come into contact with him.” The more the *macho* tries to show dominance, the more immense is the “weakness that he is trying to hide.”<sup>45</sup>

Now also, I understand the interaction between the men at the cookout as something enabled by a particular kind of space—a space symbolic of a utopic future in which the other is no longer (an)other. Muñoz claims that on “some level utopia is about a politics of emotion” and that in these structures of belonging, which are “sometimes shame, disgust, hate, and other ‘negative’ emotions,” people bond by them.<sup>46</sup> For instance, after El Compi tells El Jefe that he gets bossed around by Doña Magda, and El Jefe replies to El Compi that he also has his boss at home, they both laugh it off. While it is obvious that their *macho-ness* has been violated, they perceive this space as protected from the cultural norm, therefore, both men are able to move on with their ritual of the *carnesazo*. Furthermore, utopian performativity allows for a “mode of possibility,” or a “sense of potentiality.”<sup>47</sup> In this sense, these utopian spaces that are created by these Latino men are a place to neither reject nor accept, but to embody the oppressions and gaze of western culture onto them, whilst resisting the traditional *machismo* agenda. In other words,

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Mirande 38.

<sup>46</sup> Muñoz 97.

<sup>47</sup> Muñoz 99.



Western American culture sees the lower-class Latinas/os as uneducated wild beings, and these marginalized individuals understand this. Still, these Latino men choose to own these structures as a form of resistance but to also reaffirm the inconsistency of their identity. Even so, these occasional spaces (such as the cookout) are the soil in which ambiguous, nonnormative, nonheterosexual behaviors contradict the homophobic tendencies common in the community. Queer performances, like that of El Jefe offering his genitals for indulgence, or El Compadre gladly offering his rear for satisfaction, come without consequence on the stage in these spaces. A stage is a platform but also, like Muñoz explains, a phase.<sup>48</sup> These *carnezasos* are spaces where, even as some may argue a reaffirmation of homophobia, I also pose that the queer act becomes the norm almost as if allowing the indigenous heritage of sexuality to take over. Where in modern language ‘sexuality’ has explicit definitions tied to applications of gender, such performatives of eroticism were common native practices in pre-Columbian times, such as the Nahuas “indigenous understandings of sexuality were different from the views of the Spanish colonizers .”<sup>49</sup>

There is an ambivalence that makes up the performatives done by these Latino men. Based on my observations growing up, it is a common practice for Latino men to publicly demonstrate loving support to their women and hold them to a point of sainthood. On the other hand, they have performatives of hypermasculinity that reaffirm their *macho-*

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<sup>48</sup> Muñoz 98.

<sup>49</sup> Pete Sigal, *The Flower and the Scorpion: Sexuality and Ritual in Early Nahua Culture*, (Durham, Duke University Press, 2011) 14.

ness. As contradicting as these demonstrations of support may be, because of the lengths these Latino men go to fulfill their sexual temptations, it is frowned upon by other men to disrespect their women to their face. Which is why, like El Jefe, even with the bullying from their peers, most men respond to their spouses in endearing manners. Latino men hold women to the same status of their mothers; a model of what a woman should be. Nonetheless, women in the LatinX community are tasked to be the nurturers, therefore, when a wife becomes a mother, “she often ceases to be a lover” because men “stop relating their wives with sexual passion.”<sup>50</sup>

Nevertheless, this ambivalent behavior also comes from the historically Spanish-rooted imposed *machismo*. These hybrid hypermasculinity identities were developed when many men, during the Spanish Conquest, were unable to defend their women from “plunder, pillage, and rape.”<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, Mirande expands on *machismo* by stating that,

Native men developed an overly masculine and aggressive response in order to compensate for deeply felt feelings of powerlessness and weakness. Machismo, then, is nothing more than a futile attempt to mask a profound sense of impotence, powerlessness, and ineptitude, an expression of weakness and a sense of inferiority.<sup>52</sup>

Therefore, while on one hand, Latino men perform the role of the loving and supportive partner, on the other hand, the resentment and blame that comes from women forcefully opening up their legs and giving themselves up to the conquistadors still echoes today

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<sup>50</sup> Abalos, *The Latino Male: A Radical Redefinition*, 10.

<sup>51</sup> Mirande, Alfredo, *Hombres y Machos: Masculinity and Latino Culture*. (New York: Routledge, 2018) 36.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

through acts of oppression.<sup>53</sup> The honor that was stripped from the native men by the Spanish, and the emasculation they have felt, is placed on the shoulders of the woman. This ancient fantasy of power, which is firmly held on to, is what cripples the Latino man from experiencing an alternative identity, a whole humanness. Consequently, these historical oppressive forces that have labeled the ‘other’ are what denies these Latino men the opportunity to show any signs of weakness, therefore, the *carnesazos* become, what Victor Turner conceived as, liminal spaces, in which El Jefe and his compadres can perform outside of the socially proper gender and moral behaviors.<sup>54</sup> It became a space for them to perform an identity that they would not otherwise exhibit and inhabit.

### **La Huerita/The White Lady**

Like most cookouts in this region of Texas, the *carnezasos* is a ritual made up of phases. Preparing the *bote* (grill) is the first phase of the ritual. This phase sets up the commencement of the liminal space, I have just described, in which Latino men allow themselves to behave in culturally nonconforming ways. At El Jefe’s it was getting late in the evening, about 9 pm, and the men were beginning to feel the effects of their ice-cold beers. At that point phase two of the *carnezasos* began. Being the *cabron* (mischievous) that I was waiting for this time of the night to sneak some alcoholic drinks into my system. I knew that they knew that I was ‘partying’ too, “*el que nada ve nada teme*” (the one that

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> To read more on liminality: Turner, Victor, *Liminality, kabbalah, and the media*, (Taylor Francis Online, Religion, 1985/2011) 205-217.

does not see anything fears nothing). Without confirming that they knew, the men would often say to me that it was better doing the deed there with them than getting caught elsewhere. El Compi, the most *machista* of them all, brought up the topic of women. He asked “*¿Oñtan las rucas?*” (Where the women at?). As always, El Jefe responded, “*no empiezes a chingar cabron*” (Do not start with your nonsense). “*Es mas, aparte de mi chaparrita preciosa, la unica ruca que puede estar aqui es la de blanco*” (Either way, the only woman besides my precious shorty is the white lady). I acted oblivious to their play of words.

El Jefe called El Pelon on his badly functioning cellphone—he wouldn’t change phones “*porque salen caras estas madres*” (because these things are expensive). The men usually invited Pelon towards the middle of the party because of his strong alcohol addictive tendencies. Meanwhile, El Compadre began to shout that the music needed to be changed. The music during these *carnezasos* can indicate which phase of the event and what types of interaction are occurring. When you just arrived at the event you could tell the mood of the party by the music that was playing. If you hear Chente, then you had arrived at the emotional stage. “*Pongan a El Chente*” (Play some Chente), said El Compadre.<sup>55</sup> At this stage, El Compi began to describe the type of house he wanted. Unlike other times I had heard him do this this night, for the first time that night, I heard him describe the ‘future home’ based on what his family would want. “*Una casa chingona, para que cada uno de mis werkos tenga su propio cuarto. Y para mi vieja su propio baño.*

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<sup>55</sup> Chente is short for Vicente. Vicente Fernandez is a famous singer of ranchera music.

*Chingos de terreno vatos, para que no haiga pedo con el ruido que vamos a hacer*” (Huge ass house, so that each of my kids has their own room. For my old lady, her own restroom. Shit loads of land dudes, so that there is no issue with the noise we are all going to make.) I wondered then, “another argument with the wife huh. Caught you cheating again.” These thoughts came to mind because El Compi usually talked in this manner when his wife had caught him cheating. Of course, these were all thoughts, for I could not question these men who were my example of what being a man is.

As El Compi described his utopic home we heard the whistle. “*Ahi viene aquel puñetas*” (Here comes this fag). Nonetheless, this time *puñetas* (faggot) was used by El Jefe to refer to Pelon. It was a different way of using the term, as he is using *puñetas* affectionately towards his friend but used it as a humiliating word against the transwoman. Another contradiction of the use of the Spanish language in different settings, I suppose. Again, ‘she’ – the transwoman- came to mind, but like always, I had to be accepting. Pelon lived across the street two houses from El Jefe, and the whistle was the call of introducing what they called *la huerita* (the white lady – slang for cocaine). Pelon said, “*Mira cabrones, lo que les traje*” (look my dudes, what I brought you). I knew what that meant, the drugs.

Though many of these men only used recreational drugs in these spaces, drug use is one of those stereotypes that they choose to perform. Sex, drugs, and rock n’ roll, well *corridos* and *rancheras* (genres of Mexican music) in this case, are stereotypes of the Latino construction in the media. While in everyday spaces these men are hard-working men, in the “safe spaces” of the *carnezazos* they perform a queerness that entails their

indulgence in self-harming activities like drinking, doing cocaine, extramarital sex, and based on some of the stories I've heard, liaisons with trans-women as well. In other words, the men understand these colonial rooted stereotypes and choose to embrace them as a performance of "resistance that defies race, class-based marginalization [and] in the process" develop "a perilous sense of masculinity."<sup>56</sup> In this too, the spaces become liminal—they blur the lines of what is and is not accepted. Even more, as the 'confession' of sleeping with a transwoman was introduced in a manner of dominating penetration, it is also indicative of a potentiality of 'suppressed desires' that only these utopic spaces allow. Usually, at this point when drugs arrive, they would send me inside for some unrelated reason. However, this night was my rite of passage. I still do not know if it was because of the moment or because I would turn 15 in a couple more hours, but they did not send me off nor did they offer me any.

Living in the predominantly Mexican-American community of Brownsville, Texas, can make you feel like you are the bastard child that is neglected by both sides of the family. We reside in the liminal space in which we experience a sense of "loss and abandonment of [our] culture and the assault of U.S. culture," which in turn creates this disappointed male.<sup>57</sup> Socio-economic status—a clear division of class and labor that "designates Latinas/os as the low-end service workers who cater to wealthy residents"

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<sup>56</sup> Victor Rios and Patrick Lopez-Aguado, "*Pelones y Matones*": *Chicano Cholos Perform for a Punitive Audience, Performing the US Latina and Latino Borderlands*, (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2012) 385.

<sup>57</sup> Abalos, *The Latino Male*, 21.

intensifies these suppressed emotions.<sup>58</sup> To regain their own sense of agency these “wounded” men assume this lifestyle (of sex, drugs and alcohol) to retake ownership of their identity. Abalos lists the following points to show the characteristics of this socio-economically disappointed man:

- He is angry and wounded.
- His ego is threatened by the collapse of male privilege inherent in the story of patriarchy.
- He tries to restore the past and is tempted to resort to violence against himself and others.
- He does not know how to transform his life.
- He is a master of manipulation, not transformation.<sup>59</sup>

These contradicting, queer performed identities of the Latino male is thus linked to the pathos of their being. From one point of view, the friends El Jefe, El Compi, El Compadre, and El Pelon see their *carnezasos* as fun and games. From another, the different stages that occur within these performances are a window into their fears, their anxieties, and their confusions.

At El Jefe’s a couple of hours passed, the *corridos* turned to *boleros*, then *rancheras*, as everyone sat in the chairs that they assigned to themselves at the commencement of the *carne asada*. The ritual reached its next phase. At that age, I could keep up with

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<sup>58</sup> Rios and Lopez-Aguado, “*Pelones y Matones*,” 383.

<sup>59</sup> Abalos, 20-21.

deciphering their homoerotic *albur*. So, I observed and listened to how the conversations turned from “¿Como las quieres? Tiezas y llenas? O, suave y chiquitas?” (How do you want them? Stiff and full? Or, soft and small?), to more sincere heartfelt conversations. El Jefe approached me while directing his voice at his compadres. He asked me to get up and gave me a shot glass with tequila in it. It was the usual Jimador tequila. I had often witnessed how, after a few shots, it allowed them all to get to their vulnerable stage. I grabbed it, and as the big hand on my watch turned to 12, he said, “*A esta hora, mi hijo se convierte en hombre. Ya no es niño. Ahora eres un macho, ¿Me escuchas?*” (At this time, my son turns to a man. You are no longer a boy. Now you are a *macho*, you hear?). “*Recuerda que los hombre protegen y cuidan a su familia. Salud*” (Remember that men protect and provide for their family. Cheers.). As El Jefe spoke, I remembered La Leona and my Tio Chilango and thought about those words I had heard at that hidden Santa Rosalia cemetery. Wanting to say it out loud but holding back because I did not want to negate the moment I thought, “What about, ‘Men do not cry’?” It was almost as if El Jefe heard my thoughts because soon after he said “*Ah, y no andan joteando, asi que no chille*” (Oh, and they are not acting gay, therefore, do not cry.) As I nervously laughed and took the tequila shot from that glass, which was just the cap of a bottle, I felt a strong choking sensation, as if my own testicles had reached up to my throat. “So, it is true” I thought, “*machos* do not cry, and they protect.” I sat back down on a once-white chair that now looked beige from all the dust and I pondered. El Jefe had just confirmed my Tio Chilango’s words. That is how to be *macho*, I presumed. I just sat. I listened. I watched and learned how to be “a man.”



While everyone interacted, El Compi called me over. I felt annoyed, but I think it was because that is how El Jefe would react towards him. I really did not have anything against the guy, but Jefe was the model *macho* in my eyes. Still, I walked over to him. Compi talked to me about not following in their steps, to finish school, and most of all help my *madresita* (mother). I guess the rest of the group heard him telling me these things because they started to agree and give me input on how to be better than them. “But I want to be a man,” I thought. Nonetheless, El Compi’s words were meant to protect me from the hardships of living on American soil poor and uneducated, and not necessarily about being a man, and I understood. Again, this space creates an environment where these men can admit their fears, worries, and pain without the persecution of the outside society. Chente’s music came on again, this time it was *Por Tu Maldito Amor*. I got confused again for El Compadre, Compi, and Pelon were singing and crying.

Chente, as I have mentioned usually is for the emotionally intimate phase of the cookout. The utopic performatives that the *carne asadas* allow also erase personal spaces. These three grown men, singing to each other, using one arm to hug the person next to them and the other to hold for dear life on to that cup full of the sacred beverage, would turn back and forth as they sung with emotional knots in their throats. I had seen El Compadre cry before, but it was usually because he was extremely drunk and referencing his deceased mother. Crying over your mother is an exception at times, however, I was witnessing three grown men cry over their long-ago broken hearts. The ritual cookout neared its conclusion but before then El Jefe said to the crying men “*Chingado, ya van a empezar a jotear cabrones*” (Fuck, you are going to begin with your gay shit). To this

day, I have never seen El Jefe cry, it is the only ‘act of queerness’ that I have never seen him do. When La Leona died, I never cried, and I had never seen El Jefe cry. Why then, were these grown men crying? Why was it wrong for them to express fear and weakness? Why did El Jefe not show any fear or weakness? Why did they describe their crying but not their homoeroticism towards each other, as queer? As a whole, this therapeutic ritual allowed these men to indulge, and then expunge their insecurities, and perhaps in a way their temptations as well. They played, acted, danced, ate, drank, and were intimate with each other in ways that they would often not demonstrate to their own marital partners. Even when these men are performing in homoerotic ways in front of their partners, these *carnezasos* allow these *macho* men to perform an alternative identity. In this liminal space they found wholeness for their identities.

### **The Space of the Macho**

Latino men are taught from the moment they can speak that men do not cry because only women do, and it is queer to show emotions; that men provide, protect, and take care of the home, and most of all, that there is one way of being masculine and that is being *macho* and not effeminate. Nevertheless, through my lived experiences, but from cultural studies (such as Gloria Anzaldua) , and masculinity scholarship (David Abalos) we can see that this patriarchal *machismo* way of seeing things has created a toxic environment, not just for our women in the Latino community, but also our men who believe that this is the only way of being a man, of being *macho*. In offering solutions for a transformative Latino male, Abalos states that men who have been successful in experiencing some type

of positive transformation should be aiding those other wounded Latinos.<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, to begin such processes men need to come together and express their fears and rid themselves of those fictional histories of power. I would like to suggest here, that these stages/phases of the *carne asadas* in Brownsville, Texas, where queer identity is enacted, are spaces in which such transformations may happen. Muñoz states that a utopia is something on the horizon, something that can be seen but not reached.<sup>61</sup>

These spaces, where queer performances are ‘allowed’ or accepted, are present in many areas of the borderlands. That same night, as El Jefe was annoyed by the ‘*joterias*’ (gay performances) that the other compadres were doing, throughout the neighborhood, you could hear similar performances happening with other small groups. The experiences varied from space to space of course – you could hear *cumbias* in one area and hip-hop and reggaeton at another, and Rock en Español (Spanish Rock) at yet another area. Latino men from all ages and backgrounds participated in the performances in these spaces. Whether the known neighbor passing by and honking as they passed the *carnezasos*, or the whistleblers doing cat calls to the ‘white lady,’ or men lining up at *el Stripes* 10 minutes before midnight hoping they would make it to buy more beer, for those temporary moments, these men owned their agency, and their queer performances allowed them to be whole.

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<sup>60</sup> Abalos, 31.

<sup>61</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 97-98.

## CHAPTER III

### THE CHURCH LABELED ME A WOMAN

*The highest form of empathy, love and compassion is to meet people where they already are rather than expecting them to change. -Jay Shetty*

#### **Su Historia/Her History**

In a conversation with Doña Magda, I learned that she was just fifteen years old when she experienced a miscarriage. She lived in Tampico, Tamaulipas, Mexico at the time of this occurrence. As she discussed this experience with me, I could see a sadness in her eyes. As I observed this change in her, I told her that we did not need to speak of it. Doña Magda asserted that it was good to talk out loud about such experiences. That these experiences, and God, “*son las que mas fuerte hacen a uno*” (are the ones that make us stronger). Therefore, I sat back and listened.

I learned that when Doña Magda was at the hospital the doctors told her that they attempted everything they could for her six-month, three-week-old baby, but were unsuccessful. I asked her how she reacted towards this. She stated that she did not know how to react, that perhaps, she was in shock. Doña Magda exclaims that she did not even get to hold her baby. It took her a few moments, after the doctors told her about her loss, to begin her agony. “*Nunca conoci a mi bebe. Pero, El Señor lo tiene en su Paraiso*” (I never knew my baby. But, the Lord has him in his paradise), she stated. We both sat for a moment, processing what was just said. Soon after, I asked Doña Magda about her partner. “Where was he?” I asked. With a sigh and smile she stated, “*No se. Tal vez con otra vieja.*”

*No lo vi hasta un mes despues*” (I do not know. Possibly with another woman. I did not see him until a month later).

I could not help but feel admiration towards Doña Magda. She described her arrival in Matamoros, Tamaulipas, Mexico, after her partner at the time sent for her in Tampico. Even more, as she explained how her husband did not even go for her personally, and the reaction he had about the loss, I could not help but feel a resentment towards him, and I was not even present at the time of these experiences. Doña Magda explained that her husband pulled her by the hair up three stairways then shoved her into their hotel room. Her sister-in-law was in the room with them as well. After Doña Magda’s partner shoved her into the room, he began beating her and telling her that it was her fault that the baby was lost. He also accused her of losing the baby because it was probably another man’s child. Once the man stopped, he told her, “*no te quiero ver llorar. Es tu culpa!*” (I do not want to see you cry. It is your fault).

I asked her why she allowed herself to experience those things. She told me that she was young and stupid, and *machismo* is all she knew for her father was the same, a *machista*. This enforced my understanding of how cultural practices disrupts the abilities of questioning traditional toxic ideologies and enables a complicity in an individual. She went on to tell me that the next day before crossing to the American side of the border, her partner told her that he did not want to see her crying again because “*la gente no tenia que saber nada*” (people did not need to know anything). Therefore, she did not. As we discussed all her experiences with this man, of more abuse, him being an alcoholic and

womanizer, my admiration for her grew. She stated that she had three kids with this man until she decided to stand her ground against him.

I learned here that before she became a follower of the Pentecostal faith, she visited a church with her sister. She stated that as she was at this church, she began to feel overwhelmed. “*Llore, y llore,*” (I cried and cried), in a stoic manner she said. Doña Magda expressed that as she was in that church, she clamored to God asking him that if her partner was not for her to remove him from her life please. Needless to say, about a month later her husband was murdered.

Doña Magda said that as she recalled asking God to remove him (her husband) from her life but at the time she questioned why He removed him by death. She explained that though she was confused then, that now she understands the ways of the Lord and understands that there was a reason for that. “I cried myself to sleep every night,” she told me. “*No podia dejar que mis hijos me vieran debil. No podia dejar que la gente me siguiera viendo como una tonta*” (I could not let my children see me weak. I could not let people keep seeing me like an idiot). “Why an idiot?” I asked. “*Pues porque era un mujeriego, y todos sabian. Hasta se burlaban de mi porque les daba pena y pensaban que era una inutil. Y su familia, asi como el me culpo por el bebe, ellos me humillaron y culparon por su muerte*” (Well, because he was a womanizer, and everybody knew. They would even laugh about me because they felt sorry for me and thought I was an idiot. And, his family, the way he blamed me for the baby, they blamed me for his death). This was an explicit description of why many Latinas in this Brownsville community refrain from

showing public displays of emotion and all the blame and pain they have to endure and repress.

*“Por aqui, uno no puede enseñar su dolor. Lloras y te hacen de menos. Usan el dolor de uno para sentirse mejor”* (Around here, one cannot show their pain. You cry and they look down on you. They use others pain to make themselves feel better), she stated. Doña Magda expressed that the one time she could not keep her pain to herself was after the burial of her husband. She described how when she went to drop off the belongings of her deceased partner, his family humiliated her. There were three other women that had gone with Doña Magda to drop off his things. As she walked outside crying, these women approached her. She told them what had happened. *“No te preocupes hija. Diosito se encargara de ellos. Ya no llores. Es lo que ellos quieren”* (Do not worry my darling. God will take care of them. Do not cry anymore. That is what they want), they told her as they tried to comfort Doña Magda. This understanding of how others look at the ‘weak’ individual demonstrates two things. The first is that the community looks down on the individual who lacks strength. The second is that as the ‘weak’ have to repress emotions, they look to God for strength and comfort.

We went on to discuss how such experiences brought her closer to God. I asked her why she felt that she needed to attend church. She responded by telling me that going to church made her feel good. That being at church gave her a perception of another family in Christ; that it is motivating to be there because she feels safer and closer to God. *“Cuando no voy, siento que estoy vacia; que algo me falta. Aunque sea momentario, me siento feliz. No es costumbre, pero necesidad estar frente a Dios; me siento completa”*

(When I do not go, I feel empty; that something is missing. Even if momentary, I feel happy. It is not a habit, it is a necessity to be in front of God; I feel complete), she expressed. I thanked Doña Magda for sharing her story. She gave me a hug and a kiss and told me, “*No te olvides que Dios te ama mijo*” (Do not forget that God loves you).

Before El Jefe she had experienced an abusive past with her previous husband, the loss of her first-born child, and the blame for this loss by her husband at the time including his accusations of infidelity and betrayal. Submitting to, possibly even docile with, the toxicity of the *machismo* expectations, she endured all the abuse. She was 26 when he, the breadwinner of the house, died. Widowed with two toddlers and a five-month-old baby, without United States citizenship nor work, and with blame for her first-born and husband’s death on her shoulders she faced the grief and loss alone. Except in private, she repressed her pain from the blame that her family and culture placed on her for being a “bad” mother, wife, and person and found a source of strength in, besides her children, *Jesu Cristo* (Jesus Christ).

Doña Magda was, in a way, like the figure of *Malinali Tenepat*, also known as *La Malinche* -or *La Chingada*. The Aztec woman who was given away to the Spanish and then considered a traitor, and for

300 years she has been a slave, a force of cheap labor, colonized by the Spaniard, the Anglo, by her own people ... For 300 years she was invisible, she was not heard. Many times she wished to speak, to act, to protest, to challenge. The odds were heavily against her. She hid her feelings; she



hid her truths; she concealed her fire; but she kept stoking the inner flame. She remained faceless and voiceless, but a light shone through her veil of silence.<sup>62</sup>

Like Malinali Tenepat, Doña Magda has seen her “light”—her wellness—suppressed but, through her faith, has been able to restoke and rekindle and recover some of the fullness, and wholeness of her being.

### **Su Tiempo/Her Time**

One summer weekend Doña Magda and El Jefe had a big argument. Earlier that afternoon, about 3:00 pm El Jefe had told Doña Magda to wait for him to get home before starting dinner but had arrived at almost 6:00 pm when church began at 7:30 pm. This infuriated Doña Magda. I was in the living room resting on the sofa and watching something on the TV when El Jefe walked into the house. I quickly sat up. I knew that Doña Magda would not be happy with him for being late. I did not have to strain to hear the exchange of words between them. They were loud.

**Doña Magda:** *¿Donde estabas? Ya ni la haces, ya es bien tarde.* (Where were you? You are so inconsiderate; it is really late already.)

**El Jefe:** *¿Que? ¿Para que te enojas? Ya se que lo unico que quieres es largarte a la iglesia.* (What? Why are you getting upset? I know that all you want is to go to church.)

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<sup>62</sup> Anzaldua, Gloria, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, (San Francisco, Aunt Lute Books, 2012) 44.

**Doña Magda:** *Si, si. ¿Y que? Por eso te tardaste, ¿verdad?* (Yeah, yeah, and? That is why you took long, right?)

**El Jefe:** *¿Que chingados tienes que estar haciendo ahí siempre? Solo hay puro chismoso y hipocrita.* (What the hell do you always have to be doing there? It is full of gossipers and hypocrites.)

**Doña Magda:** *Yo no voy por ellos, yo voy por mi.* (I do not go for them; I go for me.)

**El Jefe:** *Si, a de haber alguien ahí que pretendes.* (Yeah, you probably have somebody else there for you.)

**Doña Magda:** *Si El Jefe, es exacta esa la razon.* (Yes, El Jefe, that is exactly the reason.)

**El Jefe:** *Ya vete, no necesito que hagas nada.* (Leave already, I do not need you to do anything for me.)

**Doña Magda:** *Si ya me voy. No necesito tu permiso.* (Yes, I am leaving already. I do not need your permission.)

As Doña Magda yelled these last words at El Jefe, whose male ego was bruised, he walked outside to the yard, slamming the door after him, instead of engaging with his fault. After her heated exchange with El Jefe, Doña Magda walked into the living room, where I sat, and yelled at me. “*Tu que? Vete a cambiar. Nada mas para eso son buenos. Para rascarse los huevos*” (And you? Go change. That is all you are all good for. To scratch your balls.). I meekly nodded “yes” and walked off to change. I did not want to incur the wrath of that 4-foot 11 inches lady by messing with her church time.

I got into my church clothes before Doña Magda was ready to leave so I went to hang out with El Jefe while I waited for her. He was placing the mesquite wood in *el bote* (the grill) to make himself some *carne* (meat) and seemed as if the argument did not faze him. He used a stick to move the burning mesquite, and with his back towards me, excitingly told me old stories of Aerosmith, Mötley Crüe, and Guns n' Roses concerts that he had attended in his youth and the *morras* (ladies) he took to the concerts, all the while chugging down *unas frias* (cold ones - beer). He introduced me to the music of Metallica and put the band's *Master of Puppets* on full volume in his new sound system—he had a thing for loud music on his days off from work. Doña Magda walked out of the house and into the yard just as Kirk Hammett hit his out-of-the-ordinary pinch harmonic on his guitar solo for *Master of Puppets*. She was ready for us to leave and ordered us to go just with her facial expression. As we walked toward the Caravan van, El Jefe taunted, “*Otra vez te vas con esos pinches Cristinos*” (There you go again to those damn Cristinos).<sup>63</sup> Doña Magda replied quickly and angrily, “*Y a ti que? Nadie te dice nada por las borracheras que te echas todos los dias, y a veces, sin parar*” (What is it to you? No one ever tells you anything for drinking all the time and at times for days without stopping).

As I recall the exchange, I see that his comment was a way for him to challenge Doña Magda—to mete out a form of ‘punishment’ to her by berating church. Doña Magda has always been a church woman—to this day, she is still the first in line to raise money for her church. Succumbing to, perhaps even complicit with, the negative aspects of

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<sup>63</sup> El Jefe referred to the Pentecostals of this church as Cristinos because he claimed that they were all hypocrites.

*machismo* domestic expectations she had made sure dinner was ready when the husband got home even when he repeatedly verbally abused her if the food was not to his liking.

Her response to El Jefe was therefore a form of resistance: in most other areas of their relationship I observed, she was submissive to El Jefe, but not about church. Church was the only thing no person could question her about and she refused to let him deprive her of the one thing that she has and does for herself, to be able to go to church to praise God. I got into the van as Doña Magda gave her reply to El Jefe. She joined me in the van, turned on the ignition, and we took off to church.

### **Reaching Fullness**

In this chapter I continue my exploration of how Latinas/os in my community of Brownsville, Texas, seek and find wholeness by creating spaces that permit non-culturally conforming acts, and therefore allows them to express behaviors (from emotions), normally repressed in the community. While chapter one focused on the cookout as a time and space for the *macho* man of Brownsville, Texas, to exhibit queer performatives he would normally repress, this chapter addresses how Latinas use the space of the church to find a similar ‘wholeness’ in their identity. In this, I am still drawing from Abalos’ concept of ‘wholeness’ to show how opportunities for performing what society normally represses, serve as utopic times and/or spaces for a fuller and more fulfilling expression of self. Again, while for Abalos wholeness is the sum of the feminine and masculine aspects of the self, for me in this thesis, it is the fullness of self that one derives from being able to perform *both* that which is socially repressed *and* that which is socially conforming.

In ordinary life what social behaviors are discouraged for Latinas, in this Brownsville community? What is about their selves that the community represses? In what ways does the church offer a space for them to experience wholeness? I make this address with a full understanding that the church has historically been a site of patriarchy, and the Pentecostal church that I grew up in is no exception. Nevertheless, I show how this otherwise patriarchal institution “liberates” the socially non-conforming in these women, through the time/space it offers for non-culturally conforming performatives. In what Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz calls “*Mujerista* theology,” she describes a utopic vision of “[sic] liberation-fullness of life.”<sup>64</sup> She explains that this “theology of liberation” is one in “which our Christian faith” is “not something apart from our daily reality: it is part of our daily living; it impacts the situations we face day in and day out.”<sup>65</sup> In other words, faith and cultural life-experiences are tied to one another; both have a bond which allows for contradicting performatives to co-exist within the utopian vision of ‘liberation-fullness of life.’ This outlook that ties faith to daily experiences helps me to talk about how the churches in the Latino community “create spaces, processes, and institutions” for a fullness of life.<sup>66</sup>

Isasi-Diaz has pointed out that “since wants and needs are binomial, satisfying wants as much as satisfying needs” is a “criterion for liberation-fullness of life.”<sup>67</sup> Like Doña Magda the women of Brownsville, Texas create spaces in which they can fulfill their

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<sup>64</sup> Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, *En La Lucha/In the Struggle: Elaborating a Mujerista Theology*, (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2004) 4.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Isasi-Diaz, *En La Lucha*, 5.

<sup>67</sup> Isasi-Diaz, 4.

need of worshipping a higher entity as they negotiate, resist and even protest cultural norms and expectations. Ordinarily Doña Magda may be complicit in the patriarchal cultural expectations of her daily experiences, but as we saw in her reaction to El Jefe's disregard for and berating of her church activities, she is also resistant towards the oppressive experiences that do not allow her to attain her wants and needs of her faith. While the need of faith is a spiritual fulfillment to Doña Magda, her need of a spiritual environment impacts her reaction to day to day experiences, thus, created a want for a church; her needs, consequently, attached a relationship to her wants, and vice-versa. For example, when El Jefe seemed to want to exert his *macho* patriarchal identity on Doña Magda, upon his late arrival, she imposed her faith onto the situation at hand. While, her replies never exceeded to the use of profanity like those of El Jefe, because of her need and want, Doña Magda, expressed a protest to the oppression of El Jefe, as much as she resisted being complicit to these socially cultural norms of her home, by not doing the cooking.

Furthermore, the argument was because of the limited time available to fulfill Doña Magda's desire to be whole. She expressed anxiety when she realized that the time which allowed her to do something that she needed was near and El Jefe had not arrived yet. Even more, as she rushed to get ready, she exerted her need for spiritual fulfillment by telling me to also hurry up and change. In doing so, she took out certain frustrations she had of the *macho* on me to keep the protest going. While I can argue that I understood that she was just upset and still needed to vent, her implying that 'all we are good for is to *rascarse los huevos*' illustrates her frustrations of the dominance of the male over the female.

As described in Doña Magda's experiences, and the introduction, women, like men in this community, are frowned upon to have public displays of weakness. Such as when her deceased husband told Doña Magda not to cry, prior to coming to America, because no one needed to know what is going on. Or, her stating that she did not want to display weakness in front of her children, let alone other people who would only use her pain to feel better about themselves. Therefore, the church, while still holding oppressive patriarchal ideologies, allows women like Doña Magda to create a space in which they feel liberated; to have a utopic space in which they can attain "liberation-fullness life." I will show in the following that the church is a common space for Doña Magda, and other women, to enact or perform what the social conventions repress because it does not question or sanction but actually encourages the women's emotional expressiveness.

### **La Iglesia/The Church**

Iglesia Ministerio Un Ejercito Para Cristo: Campos Revival Church is on 1555 West Adams Street of Brownsville, Texas. The church is a community funded institution established in 1990 by Pastor David Campos and made up of mostly working-class Latinos. When I first began attending the church it was a room that could sit about thirty people. As the congregation grew over the years, the church did as well. At the time that Doña Magda and El Jefe had their argument, the church was the size of an average event hall. It had an altar of about 15 by 11 feet where the pastor and his wife had their chairs, and the musicians all performed. In front of the altar was an area a few feet wider used during the prayer, dance, and healing portion of the sermons. As you face this area from

the entrance- which is the back of the room-, to the right, you had the chairs where the pastors in training sat. Next to this section was a door that took you into the nursery for infants where women exclusively performed the task of caring for the children. The church hall itself had about 15 rows of pews and made up of three sections divided by two feet of space.

Doña Magda began attending the church after the loss of her first husband. Her cousin Rosa had told her to try it out because it might help her cope with her situation. Before the church, Doña Magda's spiritual practices came from indigenous forms of healing through nature and the common practice of praying to saints. Such practices included *curanderismo* which is the use of folk practices of medicine to do spiritual, emotional, and physical healings. Also, in her upbringing, she explains, her family had altars where they had pictures of the deceased and candles for each saint they prayed to. Nonetheless, after fully accepting her 'rebirth' through Christ, she fully attached the wholeness of her being to this Pentecostal belief system. As she got more devoted to the church, she began to take part in more of the different activities that it organized. At the time I attended, the church met at least twice a month in addition to regular Sunday morning meetings, to plan *la actividad* or church activities.<sup>68</sup> These were adult meetings, but I witnessed a few of them. Leaders of the church—the pastor, musicians, and the pastors in training, were all men. The leadership positions women held were in the Sunday school program, fund-raising, and activities that involved food. So, when organizing

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<sup>68</sup> La actividad was the dinner that was served after the church services. These dinners would be sold to the congregation to generate funds for the church.



Sunday school and *la actividad* came up at these meetings the men looked to the women for a response.

Indeed sexism, though unacknowledged by the church, does exist in it. The leadership dominance of men over women in the church derives in part from the Christian belief that the man is the spiritual head of the home but also from a historical cultural imposition of *machismo* over the lives of Latino women.<sup>69</sup> As I stated in the previous chapter, *machismo* culture gives the Latino male a fantasy of power. The church intensifies this by addressing men as spiritual heads of the home: “[t]he culture and the church insist that women are subservient to males” which in turn creates a sense of invincibility to these men.<sup>70</sup> As Isasi-Diaz notes, sexist “exploitation of their [women’s] bodies” does not always entail verbal/physical abuse.<sup>71</sup> The church men did not verbally/ physically force the women of the church to take up the tasks of *la actividad* , rather, the patriarchal hegemony desensitized the women (and men) from questioning such socially sanctioned gender roles and they, instead, became complicit to this culture. That said, women, like Doña Magda stated earlier do not go to church merely for the “*chismosos*” (gossipers) - a common critique of church members in this community - but for the sake of their own liberation.

For women like Doña Magda, going through the tribulations that life brings, in a culture which does not allow for such displays of weakness, and therefore without the

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<sup>69</sup> The Bible, Ephesians 5:21-24, Corinthians 11:3 Revised Standard Version.

<sup>70</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 39.

<sup>71</sup> Isasi-Diaz, 8.

support system necessary to cope with such tribulations, reaching out to God is a reaching out for wholeness because “[l]iberation for Latinas is deeply enmeshed in what is personal to [them].”<sup>72</sup> Women in the Latina community seek relief from the cultural norms that do not allow them to protest with any form of emotional display and therefore compels them to repress the display of all forms of pain-physical, mental, emotional, spiritual. As Isasi-Diaz has noted, Christians believe that “Jesus is “Our Lord” because he understands us, he walks with us, and, in the worst moments comforts us so we will not give up.”<sup>73</sup> The result of this belief, for the women, is that the church is the place where they find value, not necessarily with other church people but with their faith, and that is the personal to them: it is a value that they need, that they want, and that they get there, without the normal objections to the expression of emotions in everyday life.

The capacity for women to make a way for their agency in the church is something addressed in Felipe Hinojosa’s, *Latino Mennonites: Civil Rights, Faith and Evangelical Culture*. In one of his chapters Hinojosa “highlights the complex and often untold stories of mujeres evangelicas (Latina evangelicals) and the important roles they played in the life of the church.”<sup>74</sup> Hinojosa, talks about “female collective action”: how women in the church create and use spaces that challenge “the traditional roles of women” within set institutions.<sup>75</sup> As he illustrates, women of the church challenged such ideologies by “their belief that God had called women to use their leadership [and abilities] in the church.”

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Isasi-Diaz, 8.

<sup>74</sup> Hinojosa, Felipe, *Latino Mennonites: Civil Rights, Faith and Evangelical Culture*, (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014) 150.

<sup>75</sup> Hinojosa, *Latino Mennonites*, 151.

What Hinojosa talks about is the kind of collective action that the women from Campos Revival Church achieved. On one hand the women were complicit in their traditionally expected “nurturing” roles of cooking, teaching and caring. On the other hand, they took pride in such tasks because they saw in their oversight of *la actividad* and Sunday school, assertive leadership roles that have been assigned to them by the divine and not man. The same group of women took on the tasks of collectively educating the children and raising funds from the dinners from month to month. In fact, I recall that compared to the men’s fundraising, the women raised most of the money for the church. These women would gather at their houses to discuss the food that would be served and which responsibilities each of the them would have. These were meetings at which men were absent and so this allowed the women to make leadership decisions related to their tasks without the imposition of a male voice. Among other things, they chose what scriptures would be taught at Sunday school and discussed the interpretation each of them had of it. These spaces were created and used by exclusively women.

### **El Clamor/The Outcry**

Doña Magda and I arrived at Campos Revival Church at about 7:45. As we parked, she anxiously told me *que me apurara porque ya llegamos tarde* (to hurry up because we are late). We got off the van and rushed to the front entrance and walked in. As usual, we walked to the front of the church, sat on the second pew and proceeded to listen to the sermon. At this age, I hated the experiences of sitting at the very front because I felt as if the pastor was preaching directly at me with an aggressive tone. At about roughly 8:30 pm

the church musicians all began to take their place on the altar. The drummer, as quietly as he could, sat on the “throne”- the term we had for the stool used-grabbed his drumsticks and air drummed to warm up. Meanwhile, the keyboardist, guitarist/vocalist, and bassist also took their spots and warmed up their fingers.

Pastor David Campos preceded his sermon with a request to his *borreguitos* (lamb) – how he referred to the congregation—to give their tithes (10% of their week’s earnings) and not to worry if they could not, “*porque Dios conoce sus corazones, y el que clama a El es lleno con Sus riquezas de amor*” (because God knows their heart, and the ones who reach out to Him is full of His riches of love). The ritual for the *ofrenda* (offering) always began with a prayer and soft music playing in the background. Doña Magda told me to observe the musicians and learn something. I was eleven years old and had demonstrated a strong liking for music but, at this age I did not know what the string names were, let alone what the men were doing with their hands. She had asked the church musicians to teach me music so that I could one day also be up there in altar *alabando a Jesus* (praising Jesus), but none of them did so, provoking her frustrated under-the-breath muttering, “*Ah, pero para la actividad nunca me ignoran*” (Oh but for the dinner, I am never ignored). So, I knew well to listen to Doña Magda and observe the musicians as they warmed up.

Doña Magda went through her purse looking for *ofrenda* but did not seem to find much. Her will to always be selflessly generous and place others first had not allowed her this day to have money for her *ofrenda*: earlier that week she had helped her sister pay her rent, knowing that her own situation was not any better.

From my seat, I observed everything occurring around me. People walked to the front of the pews to place their 10% into a basket with flowers on it while others closed their eyes, held up their hands and prayed. The *ofrendas* was the first portion of the *alabanzas* (praising) and music was the main driver of the worshiper's emotional state in these *alabanzas*. The music began with smooth, steady-sounding grooves and shifted into progressions that aroused emotional intensity. Most of the adults were up from their seats. I was familiar with this point in the ritual and I knew I had a good half hour before the adults took their seats again, so, I took advantage of the situation and decided to lie on the bench try to take a nap. While I lay down, I observed Doña Magda's eyes closed in prayer to her comforter for the strength she needed (I now presume, to face her everyday oppressions). I could hear her asking Jesus to forgive her shortcomings. I always got emotional when I saw Doña Magda tear up and this night was no different. She stood there with her feet planted on the floor and swayed from left to right between the first and second pew, the tears rolling down her cheeks. She always tried dressing as nicely as she could, within the limiting dress code of the Pentecostal church, and this night was no different: she looked beautiful but with sadness in her being.

Personally, I disliked this part of the service, which is why closed my eyes to nap. Kids my age, who were either too old to go into the back room with the toddlers but too young to dare walk outside the hall, had become accustomed to the loud noises during this ritual phase. So, often, we would take a nap, at least long enough before a particular older woman in the church who went around waking the teens up, came by to prod us back to my "purpose" of "praising the Lord." Nonetheless, my nap was cut short because *la viejita*

(the old lady) came and pinched me to wake up. At this age of my puberty, I was in “my age of reason”: no one could tell me anything because I “knew it all” and would react negatively. So, after *la viejita* pinched me awake, I got upset and sat up, ready to lash out. However, I restrained myself in Doña Magda’s presence because I knew this was her time: no one dared take this seldom moment of liberation and sense of wholeness from her. Nevertheless, I remained upset and began walking towards the exit of the church to wait on the benches outside while they finished. However, at the door, another lady of the church prevented my exit—as she did other kids. Stuck inside the church like a prisoner but stubbornly refusing to return to my original seat, I sat in the back and observed the service as the *alabanzas* continued.

Doña Magda continued to sway and pray. She was in a state of trance—caught in a moment of spiritual embodiment, if you will. So were many others in the pews. Slowly members of the congregation—mostly the women—swayed their way to the area in front of the pews, before the altar space. Fewer men went to the front and when they did most of them—including my *Tio Chilango* who was also a part of the church—just knelt, said a quieter prayer, and returned to their seats. They seemed stuck in their *macho* ways for there, in that utopic space before the altar, where all had opportunity to release the pains of their everyday lives to God without disdain, the men had remained trapped in their unwillingness to show weakness publicly. However, for Doña Magda and other women of the church, this was a time and space for release.

This part of the sermon was also not a favorite of mine because it frightened me. Still, in my rebellion and unable to leave, I sat at the back of the church and observed.

Doña Magda had already begun her *danza* (dance) before reaching the space before the altar. As Pastor Campos and the music grew intense the women began to wail, dance, speak in tongues, and then suddenly drop to the floor. All this—the *alabanza* ritual, the music, the dances, Pastor Campos preaching at the top of his lungs—were typical of a service at our church. However, this night something went a little differently. As prayer came to a close, Doña Magda was still doing turns in her *danza*. Suddenly, she wailed in tongues—something I rarely heard her do—and jumped up and down. Had this occurred outside of the church, we would have thought her crazy and unstable. Nonetheless, the time of the *alabanza* and the space between the altar and pews provided her a utopia to express the repressed without fear of condemnation. In her loud clamor she seemed to seek release from the pain of the losses of her first-born and first husband, and from the oppressive burden of working-class poverty. Like the Aztec female rites of mourning, Doña Magda’s “only means of protest was wailing.”<sup>76</sup> In his, *The History of the Indies of New Spain*, Fray Diego Duran describes the mourning rites of the Aztec women after Kings and warriors reached their death. He states that, for eighty days, Aztec women would mourn the deceased by wearing “their hair loose, hanging close to their faces... they began to dance and sing, with a strange wailing sound.”<sup>77</sup> Still, as this space allowed Doña Magda to reach liberation from the repressed emotions, it is a temporary utopia.

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<sup>76</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 43.

<sup>77</sup> Fray Diego Duran, *The History of the Indies of New Spain*, (Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1994) 149-150.

Moreover, this denigration of expressing in the public domain comes from the imposition of the Spanish ideological systems. In his analysis of Gloria Anzaldua's *Borderlands: La Frontera*, Arturo J. Aldama describes the Aztec dualism that guides Anzaldua's writing. He states that this "dualism is guided by the primary spiritual force, Omeoteotl, who is the mother and father of gods and is neither masculine or feminine; Omeoteotl is the lady and lord of duality and maker of the world, the sun, and the stars."<sup>78</sup> Still, as Omeoteotl is the duality of the Aztec spirituality, Anzaldua looks at Coatlicue who is "an earth and fertility goddess who contains and balances the "dualities of male and female , light and dark, life and death." <sup>79</sup> This balance that Coatlicue offers is what was disrupted when the Spanish conquest forcibly stripped the indigenous of their wholeness. Now, within the same structures that the Spanish have left within the church, the only tactics used to express these rites are that of wailing, the one act that is frowned upon in the public sphere; it is a protest of "cultural changes which disrupted the equality and balance between female and male, and protesting their demotion to a lesser status, their denigration ."<sup>80</sup> Doña Magda too was protesting her "demotion to a lesser status, [her] denigration." <sup>81</sup> In this moment of her trance at church, Doña Magda's found the performance opportunity for finding wellness in wholeness, for expressing a fullness of self to the congregation, something she was unable to do publicly elsewhere.

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<sup>78</sup> Arturo J. Aldama, *Disrupting Savagism: Intersecting Chicana/o, Mexican Immigrant, and Native American Struggles for Self-Representation*, (Durham, Duke University Press, 2001) 124.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Anzaldua, 43.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.



A few minutes later, everyone returned to their seats, but Doña Magda alone remained before the altar and begun to wail and spin as she went around the church. Everyone else stayed quiet for this was the first time that anything like this had occurred. And as far as everyone knew Doña Magda was not the theatrical sort. I remained seated at the back of the church wondering what was happening to Doña Magda, my mom, and started crying because I had never seen her get that way. She seemed as though she was possessed, clamoring “*Mis Hijos, los amo, no se olviden de mi. Vengo por mi pueblo pronto. Yo se que lloran. Yo se que estan en dolor. Yo se que sienten falta de valor. Pero, los amo y muy pronto estare aqui*” (My children, I love you, do not forget about me. I am coming for my people soon. I know you cry. I know you are in pain. I know you feel you have no value. But I love you and I will be here soon). Everyone stayed quiet and seemed as confused, frightened, and amazed as I was.

Pastor Campos began to exclaim, and as if ready to attack the demons head on in the church, “*Dejenla, Dios esta aqui!*” (Leave her, God is here!). The musicians, almost as if also ready for the final battle, began to play music again in a driving manner. As Doña Magda continued in her trance the congregation joined her again, where she was before the alter. This time, the men also danced and cried. Everyone was clamoring to the Lord for forgiveness. Doña Magda no longer stood out for they were all in the same space. With the music still playing, they were expressing everything that they had repressed through tears, dances, yells, singing in tongues, all in all, in their embodied spirituality. The service went on longer than usual. This was one of the most frightening days for me at this age because my mother had become a different person before my eyes. However,

now, as I look back, I can understand that in that moment of the *alabanza* and in that area and between the pews and the alter she had found a time for ‘liberation-fullness of life.’ What is more, this empowered her enough to inspire others in the congregation to experience wholeness, even if temporarily.

Michell De Certeau discusses the differences between strategy and tactics in his book *The Practice of Everyday Life*. De Certeau explains that strategies are bonded to power institutions.<sup>82</sup> The Pentecostal Church, like many other similar institutions, have “force-relationships” with their congregations. In other words, these institutions have set doctrines that its congregations must follow. It is the kind of institutional impositions that De Certeau would call the ‘proper.’ Many in the church see these doctrines as set by the Lord Himself and therefore sacred. De Certeau would, therefore, consider these doctrines as ‘strategies.’<sup>83</sup> In other words, the common practices of the church, which derive from its doctrines and are therefore seen as proper, are strategies that subdue any types of protest against the church. They are the strategies of the institution to obtain victories over the people’s use of space and gain control over their experience in time. Such strategies reinforce the *macho* ideology that men must keep their emotional control by simply kneeling to pray at and simply walking away from a space in the church, where they ought to be free to be most expressive. Such strategies buttress the daily subjection of women with the idea that God may not take away their the oppressions they face daily in the

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<sup>82</sup> Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, (Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1984) xix.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid and xx.

culture but “will give [them] the strength for the struggle.”<sup>84</sup> By deploying this strategy the church/institution can count on the oppressed returning over and over for the strength that it claims to proffer.

De Certeau describes a “tactic”—in contrast to a strategy, as belonging to the ‘other,’ which is the weaker identity in the force-relation- the congregation. Rather it “depends on time – it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized.”<sup>85</sup> While cognizant of the power of the institution and to strategically control, we cannot dismiss that the ‘proper,’ the place, has spaces that individuals can or less tactically seize for their own interests. As in the beginning narration, when Doña Magda challenged El Jefe for making her arrival at the church late, she seized the opportunity to challenge cultural ideologies to reach her space of utopia. That is to say, while in other instances Doña Magda would not quarrel with El Jefe about being late, her need and want of liberation-fullness and wholeness for her being gave her the strength to resist against the oppressive energies which she would often be complicit to. We can think of the women of the church as an example of the tactically prone “other” that De Certeau mentions .<sup>86</sup> As he states, tactics are “always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized” such as the times of the sermon of the church and the *alabanzas*. Also, the tactics of the weak, the marginalized, are ongoing because “[w]hatever it wins, it does not keep.”<sup>87</sup> These Latinas’ need and want for liberation gives them the strength to use tactics within the

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<sup>84</sup> Isasi-Diaz, *En La Lucha*, 8.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid..

<sup>86</sup> De Certeau, *The Practice*, xix.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

proper. By carefully taking momentarily advantage of the space and time they are able to briefly exploit the space. Still, while they believe that the fullness, they receive is a win, they do not to keep this fullness when they return to their regular oppressive space of their home.

Tactics do not allow for permanent victories, but for Doña Magda, they allowed her to seize the space and have a temporary utopian moment of release and wholeness. Culturally, Doña Magda and other women in our community, could not show any signs of weakness publicly. However, in using timely tactics to use the space of the church, these women embody a utopic space where the repressed is expressed and the human becomes whole, even if temporary. Living in poverty with a partner who did not approve of her church activities and in a culture that did not support public displays of emotion or weakness she had to wait for the time of the *alabanzas* for some release. And, indeed, she exploited the time to seize the church space where she sang, danced, wailed, cried, yelled, and made herself whole in a way that would be questioned outside the church.

### **De Regreso a Casa/Back Home**

That night, on the drive back home from church, Doña Magda—my mother—and I had an interesting conversation. Her sense of wholeness seemed to linger. She smiled as she drove and the usual sadness in her eyes was not there. It was infectious and even I felt a greater sense of wellbeing—my own wholeness—by seeing her genuinely smiling and not just putting on a mask.

**Me:** “*Mama, porque te pusiste asi?*” (Mom, why did you get like that?)

**Mom:** “*Como hijo?*” (How? My son.)

**Me:** “*Asi, gritando, llorando, bailando, diciendole a todos que los quieres y que pronto vienes por todos.*” (Like that, yelling, crying, dancing, telling everyone that you love them and that you will come for them soon.)

**Mom:** “*No recuerdo que eso sucediera mijo, pero, no fui yo, fue el espiritu santo hablando entre mi mientras me daba la fortaleza que necesito.*” (I do not remember that happening my son, but it was not me, it was the holy ghost speaking through me while he was giving me the strength I need.)

**Me:** “*Entonces no recuerdas como te pusiste?*” (So then, you do not remember how you got?)

**Mom:** “*No hijo, pero se que todo tiene su punto en esta vida. Y Dios me a usado de una manera que nunca me espere. Eso, y ustedes, mis hijos, es lo que necesito para seguir.*” (No son, but I know that everything has its purpose in this life. And, God has used me in a way that I never expected. That, and you my children, is all I need to keep going forward.)

**Me:** “*Me da gusto verte asi mama.*” (It makes me glad to see you like this mom.)

Many times, before this conversation, I had witnessed my mother go through tribulations and put on fake smiles in public. Now, like her, I felt that everything would be ok.

At another moment during the drive back home my mom told me that I was old enough and knew right from wrong, so it was up to me if I wanted to keep going to church with her. I did not want to keep going, but, in the moment, I did not want to ruin her sense

of fulfilment. All I said to her in return was “thank you mom.” We then talked about the possibility of me joining the middle school band. She even felt empowered to give what seemed like a symbolic penalty to my dad, El Jefe, for his behavior earlier that day: she told me not to worry, that we did not need to tell him that she was getting me an instrument.<sup>88</sup> When we arrived home. My dad was outside still drinking and listening to music. As we got off the van, my mom asked him if he had eaten already. He said no but that the meat was cooked. That was his way of telling her to cook the sides. That night, I stayed outside with him, listening to his music and learning how to be a *macho* while my mother went inside to finish cooking. The strategies of the ‘proper’ had won again, but the tactics of the other, to this day, continue to seize opportunities for wholeness.

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<sup>88</sup> I have never referred to El Jefe as my stepdad, but have always considered him my father after La Leona because of his presence in my life.

## CHAPTER IV

### ENSAMBLE CULTURAL/CULTURAL ENSEMBLE

*“Lo peor de la pobreza, no es tener nada, si no sentir que no vales nada” (The worst thing about poverty, is not having nothing, but feeling that you have no value)*

- Jose Antonio Abreu

Upon obtaining my degree in music education I wondered, “What is the next step I want to take to further my career? What do I really want to do?” I have always known that I would like to help people with music, but I just did not know which approach to take. Perhaps, I could teach to inspire, I could write music to heal the wounded soul, or I could use music as therapy to help people cope with or heal from trauma. I deeply felt that to pass on the gift of music I needed to start within my own community. Within my community of Brownsville, Texas, the Cameron County Centro Cultural focuses on giving free programs to socio-economically marginalized communities in the area. As someone who grew up poor and, therefore, understands the difficulty of trying to pay for music lessons, I decided to offer the people in my community the “luxury” of guitar lessons at this Center.

Women in my community showed enormous interest in the ensemble. Growing up in the community, I had witnessed the countless hardships that women in the community dealt with daily. However, in my upbringing in this *machismo*-steeped culture I had rarely critically analyzed and interrogated the hardships. In the community men like me, especially those of us from a lower socio-economic class, need to develop emotional

understanding and undergo ideological rehabilitation to understand the internal daily struggles of the Latina. I felt that the ensemble offered the women more than a guitar lesson: it presented them with a space/avenue for enacting their socially suppressed agency. So, empowered by critical/analytical resources I obtained from my graduate studies and seeking my own 'wholeness' through a fuller engagement with women in my community I sought to understand how—through the ensemble the women navigated their hardships/struggles. I suggest that the ensemble offered them a space of release to resist marginalization, protest oppression, and experience 'wholeness.'

### **Model for the Guitar Ensemble**

When I started a guitar ensemble at the center the excitement that these adults expressed was heartwarming but their doubts about learning how to play the guitar at their ages, which were between thirty and fifty years of age, set up a challenge. Nevertheless, I was ready and willing to take this challenge on. On most days, the group was made up of about 6 to 10 Latinas. This group was not limited to women. However, on most days, women made up the ensemble. The lessons took place every Tuesday between the hours of 1 and 3 in the afternoon. I used simple one-finger chords to teach them Mexican folk songs. This allowed me to show them that they could play the guitar while encouraging them to practice the music of our original native land, Mexico. They quickly took a liking to the instrument and to me and labeled me '*Profe*' (short for professor in Spanish).

Sometimes, some of the women in the ensemble asked me if they could leave the lesson early to get home before their kids arrived from school and/or to prepare dinner



before their husband got home from work. This did not strike me as odd for these were common practices among women in the Latino community in Brownsville and I had often witnessed them among the women during my upbringing. Within this ensemble I began to see the many ways in which Latinas negotiated time, to allow themselves the opportunity of learning music while still fulfilling their responsibilities at home. Using the same pedagogical structure that I used with this earlier group, I created a new guitar ensemble to see how it might serve as a site of social support and the guitar as a tool of empowerment for these women.

My mother is my inspiration for volunteering to teach guitar at the Center and creating a new ensemble where self-proclaimed agency may be obtained. Like many women migrating to *el norte* (the north) in search of a better future, to join a family that finally had enough resources to bring them over, or fleeing from family or political abuse, my mother migrated from Mexico when she was just fifteen years old. After her first husband La Leona died, my mother was stuck alone with three children and no one to help her financially. I saw and appreciated that she took any job that came her way to make ends meet, from cleaning houses or offices, and serving food, to making food plates to sell. I recall that when I was about fourteen years old the shop Guitar Center had a grand opening sale in Brownsville. I had saved about \$280 by mowing lawns and washing cars among other jobs to buy a guitar amp. My mom agreed to help me with the rest of the cost with the condition that I would pay her back when I got paid for doing more jobs.

The night of the grand opening a childhood friend with whom I had been working through the summer to buy ourselves amps, tagged along. We found what we wanted, a

Marshall half stack. His parents had given him enough to afford its price tag, but I knew even with my mom's help I couldn't afford it. I saw a cheaper but still suitable Line 6 amp. It was \$400 plus tax and told my mother that I needed about \$150 more to buy it. I could tell that she really wanted me to have this amp. I would never forget what happened next. My mom told me that she had enough but I saw her rummaging through her purse for money. I told her not to worry, and that we could find something else. Assertively, she said, "No!" flipped her purse upside down and dumped its contents on the counter to look for every bit of cash she could. Her willingness to sacrifice was not lost on the store salesperson: he said: "Oh, I had not checked but this equipment has an extra 15% off today." Even with the discount we were ten dollars shy but my friend, Robert, came up behind me and slid a twenty into my hand. I looked at my mom smiling and said, "*Ya ama, mira me lo traen. Ten lo demas para pagarlo*" (Look mom, they are bringing it already. Here is my cash to pay it already). She kept thanking the cashier that took our payment. I always understood that we were not wealthy and tried not to ask for much. Nonetheless, her endless support and confidence in my talents played a central role in my ability today to make living through music.

My goal with the ensemble was to create an environment in which the participants feel they have emotional ties to each other while constructing a space that allows for social support and agency. Like how the cookouts released men to contradict the homophobia of their *macho* culture with queer acts, and how church worship induced the wailing of the woman to transgress the cultural norm that frowns upon demonstrating weakness in public, this site – the guitar ensemble – was a space in which the women performed

transgressive behaviors. The women I have worked with are working class people with family responsibilities that socially, culturally, and financially limit their ability to have the ‘luxury’ of music lessons. However, with the ensemble the women challenged what the ‘norm’ was to demonstrate what it could be. Indeed, they left the rehearsals early to make sure the home was ready for the husband’s arrival from work. However, at the same time, in their very presence at the guitar lessons they asserted or claimed the right to have their own personal time and space.

### **Why the Guitar?**

My decision to teach the guitar was not solely based on my ability with the instrument. I considered several other factors. One was more metaphorical and derives from the association of the instrument with women and women’s bodies. Spanish nouns are gendered and the Spanish word for the guitar ‘*la guitarra*’ is a feminine noun.<sup>89</sup> Indeed the very dimensions of the guitar tends to be regarded as the likeness of a woman’s body. Explanations of the dimensions of the guitar are that they are shaped the way to maximally amplify the vibrations of its strings,<sup>90</sup> or merely to perpetuate the traditional form. The question yet to be answered is this. Like all instruments, the guitar is made up of different parts. However, not only are the names of its parts—neck, waist, back, head, etc—based

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<sup>89</sup> Graham Wade, *A Concise History of the Classic Guitar*, (Pacific, Missouri, Mel Bay Publications, 2001). This book traces the ancestry of the guitar. Here we see the various versions of the guitar through history and the varying places of origin.

<sup>90</sup> Ralph Denyer, *The Guitar Handbook*, (London, Pan Books, 1992). The book describes the anatomy of the guitar and explains why it is constructed in the way it is.

on the human body, but the anatomy of the guitar appear to be modeled after a woman's body<sup>91</sup> Ironically, the world of classical guitar is a male dominated one. Women are increasingly recognized in the classical guitar world but those recognized as *virtuosos* of the instrument are mostly male.<sup>92</sup> Like the lives of the women in the community the material body of the guitar seems to have become woman the object to fulfill men's needs and further their personal gain. Therefore, I drew inspiration from this likeness for the ensemble by asking members to imagine the guitar metaphorically as a woman striving to liberate herself from all kinds of marginalization.

Indeed, historically, the guitar itself has been a relatively marginalized instrument. Not only has it been regarded as a common, folk instrument, but famous composers such as Hector Berlioz have stated the difficulty of creating musical scores for it.<sup>93</sup> This type of thought among musicians of the classical cannon resulted in the marginalization of the guitar. Musicians did not necessarily disregard the instrument. Guitar activist, Andres Segovia, wrote in his autobiography that before raising it to the loftiest levels of the music world, he "found it almost at a standstill." He noted that, "at one time, the guitar lacked a legitimate or even a usable repertoire" but that "a surprising number of works have been and continue to be written for it by renowned composers."<sup>94</sup> Notwithstanding Segovia's

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<sup>91</sup> This question is one that has come up in discourse within the guitar communities that I am/have been a part of.

<sup>92</sup> Some acknowledged women virtuosos are Ana Vidovic, Lily Afshar, and Gohar Vardanyan.

<sup>93</sup> Hector Berlioz, *Treatise on Instrumentation*, (New York, New York, Publisher of Music, 1948) 145-150.

<sup>94</sup> Andres Segovia, *Andres Segovia: An Autobiography of the Years 1893-1920*, (New York, Macmillan Publishing, 1976) viii.

strong advocacy for positioning the guitar in the classical canon, the instrument is still segregated to its own spaces. Currently, the guitar is seen in concertos (a soloist playing with an orchestra), in guitar orchestras, in solo performances, or in chamber ensembles. However, it is usually a guest instrument or played within their guitar environment (guitar ensembles or as soloists). While many may argue that this is due to its physical limitations such as a lack of tonal control during a performance or risk of being drowned out by the, the guitar is still visibly separated from all other orchestral string instruments, such as the violins and cellos of an orchestra. In cities like Houston, San Antonio, and Dallas, public-school districts have more orchestral and band programs than guitar programs.<sup>95</sup> Like the LatinX community, the guitar's ambiguity has sufficed to segregate the instrument into its own spaces, where even as it is not disregarded from the classical cannon, it is not included in all the 'classical' spaces. And, like guitar, historically the LatinX community, though legally "white", is segregated from white communities.

Part of the marginalization of the guitar can be seen in its history within the LatinX community itself. Until a few decades ago, many of the church denominations of some of the women worked with, refrained from using the guitar in the church. In Paul Barton's *Hispanic Methodists, Presbyterians, and Baptists in Texas*, which describes the challenges religious/cultural identity Mexicans and Mexican-Americans had negotiate in leaving Catholicism for a Protestant faith, he explains that "In the first few generations, los Protestantos' worship music ... refrained from using the guitar ... because the instrument

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<sup>95</sup> The information was gathered from the school districts' websites and focused on the high school programs.

was used in *cantinas*, *fiestas* and other “secular” settings.”<sup>96</sup> Interestingly after the Protestant churches sanctioned the use of guitar in the church, it was almost exclusively men who played it. I have heard from various women who are a part of the different churches in this community, that they wish they could be able to play in the church group but that was the exclusive purview of the men of the church, women could only partake in the church music by providing backup vocals, or as members of the congregation. Here, as in the classical guitar world, an instrument imagined as a woman’s body has become the near exclusive “use” of men. This too, affirmed the importance of imagining the guitar as an embodiment of the women’s marginalization, resistance and therefore potential restoration to wholeness.

When I was first beginning this project, I had a challenging time in deciding how I could use music to serve as a platform, I was thinking about using voice (a choir) as my tool.<sup>97</sup> Nonetheless, I came to realize that the voice (singing) is an instrument commonly used by women within this community to express themselves and alleviate the effects of their emotional oppression. I figured that this would not be suitable because the research would too easily generate results I expected. My decision to use the guitar, specifically classical guitar,<sup>98</sup> was based on this knowledge, and not solely on my abilities to teach the instrument. While this task, on the pedagogical side, made it a familiar environment for

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<sup>96</sup> Paul Barton, *Hispanic Methodists, Presbyterians, and Baptists in Texas*, (Austin, Texas, University of Texas Press, 2006) 65-66

<sup>97</sup> When I first began this project I was unsure of how to use music and the creation of space to perceive a wholeness. Here I am now describing the process of constructing such a space.

<sup>98</sup> Classical guitar instruction refers to the approach of teaching the instrument. That is both technique and musical literature.

me, it is the marginalization of the instrument that inspired its use. Upon deciding on using guitar, because of my prior experience with the Center's ensemble, and my new objective of exploring the use of space within my community, I modeled this new group after the previously stated ensemble.

### **El Nuevo Ensamble Cultural/The New Cultural Ensemble**

The ensemble began with seven Latinas. Tuesday, June 5, 2018, the day of my birthday, was the day I decided to begin the guitar ensemble. As Dar, Paz, Mi and the rest of the women walked into the MusiK Studio - which was offering the space for this work - I asked them to sit in the big rehearsal room which had seven chairs set up into two rows.<sup>99</sup> This rehearsal room has a big window placed on the wall that splits the lobby and the room in which the group was in. Before I walked into the room, I casually observed from the other side of this window. I assumed myself to be gathering supplies to not make it seem as if I was staring at a group of objects. Nonetheless, as I did this, I could not help but notice that the women of the group had almost unknowingly separated themselves by age. Furthermore, very little conversation seemed to be occurring during this period of about ten minutes that I allowed so that the whole group would be present.

I walked into the room and said, "*Buen dia muchachas, como estan?*" (Hello ladies how are you doing?) as I smiled and looked at them. Shyly, some responded, "*Muy*

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<sup>99</sup> I did not use their legal name for confidentiality reasons. Still, the names I chose were based on their personalities and how they claimed the group allowed them to feel. Dar (to give) is for their need to always be nurturing and self-less. Paz (peace) was for how they felt after every meeting day. Mi (me) for the voice they have longed for and have found within the group.

*bien, gracias*” (Very well thank you), while others replied with, “*Bien, y usted?*” (Good, and you). As I responded to their comments, I sat down in front of them on a box which is used to put away cables, power strips, mics, etc. Before saying anything else, I purposely sat in silence and allowed the energy of the room to be felt by everyone. I took a deep breath, smiled, and asked, “*Pueden oir eso?*” (Can you hear that). I got plenty of “what?” when I asked this, however, the response that resonated the most was of Paz. As she giggled nervously, she stated “No entiendo.” This stood out because it demonstrated to me that nerves were claiming her presence at this moment. I smiled at her and the group and said, “*El silencio, lo oyen?*” (The silence, can you hear it?). With oh’s and ah’s they nodded yes. I went on to tell them that one thing that music has taught me is that even in silence our melodies sing. That through music I have understood that in the silence that life brings I have learned to embrace my solitude.

I then abruptly asked if they had any questions before beginning. I assumed that I would get asked to elaborate on my statement, nonetheless, the question asked was why we were having our first meeting on a Tuesday and not Monday. While I had a response to this question it amicably forced me to skip elaborating on my motivational speech. Moreover, as my years instructing have taught me, I had to improvise and smoothly move on. Therefore, I answered them by letting them know that I chose this specific day because it was my birthday. In a nurturing manner, these women questioned me as to why I was working on my birthday. I went on to respond that this was a day of reawakening for me,



a day for a new beginning.<sup>100</sup> To reach a new consciousness we, as a group, had to go through processes that involved the mind (discussions about our culture), the body (discussions about painful and traumatic experiences, along with the performing of music that is often done by males), and the spirit (their views on their spirituality, whether religious by cultural means, or spiritual by ties to members in their community).

Before rehearsals we would begin the conversation by asking if there was an interesting event the ensemble members want to share. As the conversations progressed weekly, everyone understood the routine and always shared something to help the group's consciousness flourish. For instance, I was able to get the students to see why I had chosen for us to play songs that originally objectified women: a crucial choice to change the lyrics as our own empowering act of reversal against the misogyny. Critical race theory analyzes the intersections of sexism, classism, immigration, language, and homophobia.<sup>101</sup> In discussions we interrogated *machismo*, masculinity, femininity, poverty, children, and work. Because the participants still viewed musical literature as a high-class luxury, I tried to change this mentality by showing them through their own successes that music is for everyone. We began by learning what rhythm was, how it was felt, how it is read, and how it is performed. Once we achieved this, we began to introduce the notes on the music staff. At first, they felt overwhelmed because it was an entire new language that they were learning, but, through repetitive practice, positive reinforcement, and support they began

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<sup>100</sup> I explained to the group what the purpose of the ensemble was, and that through the experiences within it, I hoped to gain wholeness.

<sup>101</sup> Jennifer Ayala, *PAR*, 25.

to see that it was not as hard as they thought it to be. At the end of the project, the group was able to read the entire staff, knew all of first position of the guitar, and all the women were playing solos and ensemble pieces, something that can take ensembles a few years to achieve.

As the instruction progressed from week to week, I noticed that two of the students were missing quite often so I reached out to them. The first told me with regret that that she would not be able to continue with the ensemble because she did not have anyone to look after her children. I assured that she is always welcome to bring her children. However, it was the last conversation we had and did not hear from her when I reached out. The second said she could not continue because of health issues that required her to travel. So, in a month, we were down to five students. However, by now, they were all playing and singing “Alla en el Rancho Grande,” a common Mexican folk song. At this time, I played Saturday nights at Gazpachos - an Italian/Mexican restaurant. So, I would invite them to my performances to see an example of a live guitar performance but also to socialize. Usually they brought their spouses and/or children along, bought food and drinks, and requested that I sing songs they enjoyed. I noticed that two more students were beginning to miss the rehearsals. Upon contacting these students, I learned that one student’s spouse did not like that a younger man was instructing her and was compelled to quit despite her strong desire to be a part of the group. The other student explained that her husband complained that the group was “*meterle ideas idiotas y cosas de gringos en la cabeza*” (putting idiot and Anglo ideas into her head). The rest of the students consoled me and asked me not to be distraught. They indicated that, in their minds, this was exactly

why we should be offering music lessons and other activities like this: they were platforms to help in liberation from all kinds of oppression.

### **Dar, Paz, and Mi: Participants' Experiences**

The students in the ensemble who made it to the end were constantly involved in making this project work. Dar is a Latina who migrated from Mexico and now resides in Brownsville, Texas. She is in her 50s and married with two children, a girl and a boy. She joined the ensemble because music has always been something that she wanted to do. When her daughter was in her teens, she bought her a violin so that she could learn how to play it, but she never really picked it up. Dar states that from time to time she would grab the violin and just noodle with it. One of her concerns about joining the group was that she now lives with arthritis in her hands. I told her that we could modify certain techniques to suit her hands and to not allow that to be the only reason she wouldn't join. From our individual discussions I have learned that the environment at home is a positive one. Her children along with her husband have always been supportive of her endeavors and seem to be happy that she is finally learning how to play music.

Paz is a Latina who migrated from Matamoros, Tamaulipas, the sister city of Brownsville, Texas on the opposite side of the *rio*. Paz is a single mother of four in her 30s. She has been subject to domestic abuse in the past and now chooses to be single so that she can show her children that you can always get through hard times even after trauma. She mentioned that she joined the group because she wanted to learn how to read music so that she could share that with her children. She wanted to stick strictly to the

classical guitar approach because she wants to learn all she can about music literature and challenge herself to do more complex things. While she remained committed through the end of the project, there were several rehearsals that she had to miss because she did not have someone to care for her children or could not afford it that week. As with the previously mentioned student, I told her that she was always welcome to bring them to the class. Nonetheless, she kindly declined.

Mi migrated from the city of San Luis Potosi in Mexico. She is a single mother of six children, three of which have moved out to school or work. Mi is the quietest of the group. All her children support her decision to take up music, but her spouse is the reason she joined the group. When she was asked about her reasons for joining the ensemble, she stated that it was because she always wanted to learn about music and especially the piano but was happy to start with the guitar. Even so, it was not until a year after our lessons began that, in one of our individual conversations, that I learned that when she joined the ensemble her husband had just passed away and she was looking for an outlet to cope with her situation. She states that she is very happy that she did because, not only is she able to read music now, but she has learned that even as much as she loved her deceased husband, the relationship itself was an abusive one.

When the group first began, the members were socially detached from one another. They would often walk out to attend to urgent phone calls from family members, and they had strong doubts whether they would be able to learn how to play the guitar. As time progressed and their technical skills and musical abilities improved, I saw a positive change. Rarely would they miss. They performed at events and recitals that I witnessed

and, even if momentarily, this enabled them to feel liberated. After about a year of lessons the students seemed to interact with each other more, to the point that I can say that they consider each other as friends. Phones would no longer be an issue; if it rang they would say things like, “*Si ya se que tengo que tener la cena lista, pero mi Viejo se puede esperar por ahorita*” (Yes, I know I still have to make dinner when I get home, but for now my man can wait.). They seemed to take pride in being part of the ensemble but mostly in doing something that they never thought they would do.

Additionally, the group began demonstrating solidarity to each other and to the ensemble as a unit after a performance they did for the instructors at the MusiK Studio. Here, they were to perform the solo pieces they each had and the ensemble piece that they were to perform for the 2018 Holidays Recital in December. I could tell that they were all nervous by their body movements and interactions. Before this, many of their live presentations consisted of popular Mexican folk tunes, which they seemed to really enjoy. Nonetheless, this time they were presenting music literature that is ‘meant for those who can afford and understand it.’ One by one they performed their solos, and while they made mistakes, they were minor and did not seem to take away from their individual presentations. After the last of the solos, they all sat in their assigned chair to perform the ensemble piece. The piece was in three separate guitar parts, therefore, they each had to learn their own part to create one piece performed by three different individuals. The performance was not as successful as we had hoped. The group had “negative emotions [which] include sadness, shame, and anger” because of their unsuccessful ensemble

performance.<sup>102</sup> Nevertheless this also demonstrated that this ‘joint activity’ had created a structure in which each member felt that they had something to offer.<sup>103</sup> Without my requesting, they all decided to get together on their own time to practice the ensemble piece for their final performance. I did not know that this had occurred until our conversation after the recital. It clearly made me a very proud music instructor, but mostly, I felt the positive emotions along with them after they successfully performed their ensemble piece in front of an audience of over 150 people.

### **La Ultima Sesión/The Last Session**

To finalize our conversations, I asked each to describe what the group meant to them. The one surprising response that I received from them as a group was that they were very happy that an opportunity like this was offered. Moreover, because they all have young girls and boys, they hoped to pass on both the ability of playing music and the ability to demonstrate them how to avoid being complicit to toxic ideologies within our community, specifically *machismo*. Mi mentioned that she had created a messenger account that she gave to her place of employment because she wanted to see when they called her to work without letting them know she has seen the message. She explained that losing a few bucks over something as beautiful as music was worth it: her growing competency in music has become more valuable than her Saturday pay. work. Similarly, Dar and Paz mentioned that they would rather be doing something for themselves on that

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<sup>102</sup> Lawler, *An Affect*, 333-334.

<sup>103</sup> Lawler, 322.

specific time and day, than making money for someone else. They were all very appreciative of my instruction, from learning all the music literature in Spanish so that I would be able to teach them in our native tongue, to my constant trips from College Station to Brownsville so that I could personally work with them. I feel we were successful in creating a space that allowed for their leadership and agency.

In our last meeting, I told the group that I had three last questions I wanted to ask them: “*Quien Soy Yo?*” (Who Am I?); “*Que es La Vida*” (What is Life?); and “*Que Pretendo de Ella?*” (What Do I Seek from Life?). The responses to the first question were very inspiring to me. They were evidence of the result that platforms such as the ensemble can offer. Some said they were students of life, and that any knowledge that came their way came with a responsibility to pass it on. Some said the ensemble allowed them to feel ‘grand’ because they have nothing to prove to anyone and believe they can do anything they set their minds to. To the second question they answered severally that life is knowing how to live and enjoying every experience, whether good or bad, because if joy is not present, it is the equivalent of being dead. Or, that it is the ability to feel you have the power to feel blessed and to allow yourself to believe your endeavors. To the third question they said they wanted God to give them enough life to keep doing music because it makes them feel alive. They wanted to be able to pass music on to their kin and for me to always be there to guide them. Mi gave the response that struck me the most: that she seeks or expects nothing from life because she has the power to choose what she wants to obtain from life; that her hard-work is what will allow her to go as far as she wishes to go.

With these final questions I thanked the group for their commitment and their transparency about their experiences. Now, after the project has finished, Dar and Mi want to learn how to play the accordion. And, even though I do not know how to play the accordion, I have promised them that I will teach them, and have begun to study the instrument. Paz wants to keep learning the classical guitar because it challenges her and motivates her to feel as though she can do challenging things. Mi has also begun teaching an introductory guitar ensemble at the Cultural Center where she and I first met. Furthermore, our activism within our community is still going. With Mi's and my commitment, we have started planning a community guitar ensemble that will allow for both women and men to join. Our goal is to keep the discourse going about the different experiences that are happening within our community, through guitar, singing, and conversation. These Latino women used the guitar and the ensemble for self-empowerment, by creating spaces of transformation for themselves. They still take pride in being the 'woman of the house' but are increasingly allowing themselves to fulfill wants and needs that enable their wholeness. They enjoyed a collective sense of empowerment, liberation and well-being as part of the group. As a Latino man seeking my own 'wholeness' in a *machismo* culture, witnessing these women's sense of empowerment as they learned guitar gives me hope that for similar platforms to build a culture that resists and hopefully defeats oppressive ideologies.



## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

*I am not an example of what my community should be, but a sample of what can come out of it.*

– Jose Luis Zelaya

#### **Finally, Tears.**

In the summer of 2003, my high-school sweetheart who I will call Roma, and I began to date. After a few months of dating, Roma and I got closer. It was during this time that we both learned about our lived experiences. The more we learned about each other, the more we allowed ourselves to be emotionally intimate. Still, while I learned about her former abusive relationship, I kept my stories about La Leona to myself. That October I learned that I became emotionally attached to Roma. Up to this point I had always felt resentment towards La Leona. However, all these sentiments were always kept to my own mind until this moment.

That October, Roma and I arrived at my house after high-school marching band practice. It was a Friday, because El Jefe, as usual, had *el bote* on. I asked my mom how her day was as Roma hugged her and gave her a kiss on the cheek- a common way of greeting. After hugging and giving Roma a kiss, my mother replied to me saying that it had been a busy day. As Roma sat next to my mom and began conversing at the table that we usually used in cookouts, I approached my dad and asked him, “¿Y usted Jefe, como esta?” (and you dad, how are you?). My dad replied with, “*pos bien chingado por el jale, pero, pos con unas frias o se me quita o se me olvida*” (well, really exhausted from work,

but, with some cold ones it either goes away or I forget). I routinely laughed, as this was a common response from El Jefe. I told Roma I was going to grab something to drink and asked her if she wanted anything. She replied that she would go in with me and see what was available. She got up and I excused myself from my mom and El Jefe.

Upon walking in, my sister Windy, who had just turned fourteen years of age, was crying on the sofa. I already knew the reason, and in my customs of those days, I told her to stop, that tears would not make any difference. “You do not get it,” she replied. I answered back with, “You are wrong. I do get it, but we see things differently.” During this interchange of dialogue, Roma asked what we were referring to. As I poured some beer into a cup, so that my mom would not find out that I was drinking, Windy said, “of course he would not tell you. *¡Pinches machos!*” (fucking *machos*). I had not realized it, but that day would have been La Leona’s birthday. I was always confused at that age about the dates of family members’ birthdays because there were about seven different birthdays in October. Still, as Windy began to tell Roma that she really missed La Leona, that she still loves him, and that she wishes she had known him longer, I got upset.

As this aggravated me, I reacted by telling Windy, “*¡¿ya vas a empezar?!?*” (there you go again). To which Roma replied to me, “do not be that way, please.” Exasperated I sighed and told Roma that I would be in my room. Roma got to my room a few minutes later because she stayed with Windy to console her. As Roma closed the door I exclaimed, “I do not know why she has to always cry. Why do that with my dad outside?” Roma assertively stated that it was not fair of me to react in that manner; that she did not appreciate this side of me. I did not get what she meant then, but I apologized. We sat in

silence for a couple of minutes. Then she asked why I had not talked to her about La Leona. I mentioned to Roma that it was a subject that I did not like to bring up. “Why not?” she asked. “What is the purpose?” I replied. Again, we sat in silence.

I do not know why, and never asked, but Roma asked me if I had ever cried for him. I reflected for about a minute and told her that I could not remember ever crying for him. I went on to say that I had mixed feelings about him because of everything my mother had to endure with him. I went on to state that it was not fair that he could just leave us the way he did. Roma just listened as I kept venting. After a few minutes, she hugged me. She just said, “it is okay to cry babe.” I reminded her that I do not do such things, however, as we talked, I began to feel a knot in my throat. I felt less than a *macho* in this moment, however, I felt like weight and relief came off my shoulders. It finally happened. El Leoncito (lion cub) finally shed a tear for La Leona. Needless to say, this 15-year-old girl taught me that there was a different side of my masculinity that was ok to embody; that was, it was ok to be vulnerable. It was in this relationship that, at least in private or safe spaces, I learned that it was ok to cry; even if temporary, I felt a liberation, a wholeness to my being. Nevertheless, until this project, that was the first and last time I did such a thing.

### **An Alternative Culture**

In this project, I have described the narratives of those people in my community that have been of an influence on me. Exploring my community through the contradicting performatives within the *machismo* ideology has served as the first step for me to understand how we may create spaces where the repressed is expressed. While I did not

offer solutions, I hope that this discourse may be of assistance to the person who does. Still, as I have understood that culture is practiced different from home to home, I have also learned to embrace those utopic spaces where Doña Magda, El Jefe and his compadres, and the women of the ensemble have felt liberated; a wholeness to their being.

The theme of this work was based around the notion that ‘we’ do not cry. As I begin and end this project with my own repression and then expression of my loss of La Leona, I have begun my own rehabilitation process. In La Leona’s narration we saw how the toxic social constructions, that he practiced, led to his demise. Ultimately, this was believed, by Doña Magda- in chapter two-, to have, in a way, liberated her from a toxic relationship. Nevertheless, it was in that time of my life that I learned that ‘we’ do not cry, we protect and provide. Still, as La Macarena was crying so much over his best friend’s death, he demonstrated that this sentiment of not crying is a contradiction of our culture. The use of the burial site as a space where La Macarena can cry, without being looked down on, is representative of the utopic performatives that can be embodied. Jose Muñoz explained his concept of a utopia as ‘not prescriptive; [sic] it renders potential blueprints of a world not quite here, a horizon of possibility, not a fixed schema.’<sup>104</sup> While these performatives, such as that of La Macarena, are contradicting to the notion of not crying, they are also indicative of a ‘horizon of possibility’ that may create an alternative culture.

The *carnezasos*, the church, and the ensemble are just a small portion of spaces where homosocial bonding occurs. While the men’s homosocial bonding during the cookouts is

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<sup>104</sup> Jose Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, (New York, New York University Press, 2009) 97.

done by teasing each other to break the rules of masculinity, the women of the church and ensemble do not necessarily do the same as the men do in ‘breaking the rules’ to demonstrate this bond, but perhaps, they encourage each other to break certain expectations of motherhood and wifedom. As illustrated in the narratives, there are many possibilities for the use of these liminal spaces to embody wholeness. Bakhtin describes the carnival as spaces where one can perform non-normativity through practice, and therefore, create a potentiality of an alternative culture.<sup>105</sup> Still, this carnival-like tendencies that are performed within this community illustrates the temporary utopia that leads back to what is ‘the normal.’ How do we get these temporary liberating moments to become ‘the normal’ and not just the liminal?

There are scholars, such as Stephen Greenblatt, who suggest that, in these liminal spaces where transgression is practiced, “[p]ower absorbs the potential for change, permitting itself to be questioned for the tactical and pragmatic purposes of seeming to appear open, before finally reasserting itself once more.”<sup>106</sup> In other words, the strategies of the ‘proper’ are to allow for these transgressions to occur within these liminal spaces so that, in the everyday society, any form of protest is not thought of. To contrast this school of thought, there are those scholars, like Michael Bristol and Andrew Stott, who argue that the “Festival is not contained by authority... but rather overrides it in certain circumstances.”<sup>107</sup> This context of the ‘festival’ and ‘comedy’ allows for the momentary

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<sup>105</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, (Austin, The University of Texas Press, 1981)

<sup>106</sup> Andrew Stott, *Comedy*, (New York, Routledge, 2005) 35.

<sup>107</sup> Andrew Stott, 38.

transgression to become the ‘norm’ within a traditional belief system. Furthermore, as I agree with the latter school of thought, and Judith Butler’s notion of disrupting and creating new ‘norms’ through the repetitive act of ‘doing,’ I believe that these liminal spaces, discussed in the chapters, can become the ‘norm’ through its understanding and application of repetitive action to reach the utopia which becomes the ‘normal.’<sup>108</sup>

Even so, while the discourse of this work was strictly done with the traditional social constructs of the woman and man, there is still much work to be done to assist the LGBTQ community. As we saw from El Jefe’s initial narrative, the homophobia within this culture is still gravely strong. Gay Latino men feel the wrath of this toxic masculinity found in many Latino communities. However, this homophobia, as El Jefe demonstrated, is perhaps the repressed attempting to express. Such examples are those of El Jefe and his compadre enacting homoerotic performatives with each other. By exploring the masculinity of the *macho* through queerness, I was able to explore another side of the *macho* identity that is embodied in ‘safe’ spaces. Still, instead of bashing the heads, both physically and metaphorically, of the gay community, we need to get rid of this homophobia that has become traditionally internal. In doing this, we can balance the feminine and masculine required for our whole being. To understand the queer does not mean to be a homosexual or to emasculate the *macho*, but to understand this queerness within the Latino male. It means to be fully accepting of all the contradictions and ambiguities that come from being a Latino to create a whole masculine.

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<sup>108</sup> Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory.” *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 519-31. Doi: 10.2307/3207893.

Feeling inferior, to what the facade of the higher-class society claims, is of essence here. Again, for these men, racism and socio-economic oppression play a role in feeling less than *macho*. The American culture has sold the brown other the ideology of capitalism, and in turn, many of these Latino men feed into this system that should not claim the Latino culture but does. Nonetheless, to understand and break away from such cycles that these hegemonic structures set up through American and negative *machismo* cultures, we need to open up avenues, stages, like these men have, in which identities can perform their wholeness, not just to construct safe spaces, but to create an alternative culture which will enable the de/reconstruction of these more toxic hybrid identities. “Revenge is always destructive,” therefore, the course of action is not to fight or rebel against the Anglo-American, but to educate whole communities to, perhaps one day, have an all-inclusive future, a reachable utopia.<sup>109</sup>

Latino men often reject the idea of projecting emotions, being affectionate, and in turn take it out on their spouses. An issue, with avoiding such feelings and identities, is that this often suppresses our spouses’ own emotions; we look to them for nurturing and care but disregard their needs in the process. Much of this ideology is instilled by systematic structures that labels and dictates the role of a person within a culture. Therefore, I looked at how the space of the church allows for women to clamor. For the women of my community, the church is the place where solidarity is felt, and liberation and fullness are experienced. To explore this fullness, I analyzed Doña Magda’s

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<sup>109</sup> David Abalos, *The Latino Male: A Radical Redefinition*, 23.

experiences that attracted her to religion. As Isasi-Diaz explains, the “criterion for liberation-fullness of life” is to satisfy the “wants as much as satisfying the needs.”<sup>110</sup> Therefore, as I explored the use of space, within the church, to express the repressed, I analyzed the need and want of the church environment to the Latina. This allowed me to demonstrate how these spaces are cultivated by the individual in order to embody utopic performatives that allow for a temporary wholeness.

As I witnessed these constructed spaces, I decided to create a space – the guitar ensemble - to see if individuals could obtain a positive perception of themselves. As I constructed this space, I decided to work with strictly Latinas who are from the working-class. This decision was subjective, for it was inspired by my admiration of my mother. Furthermore, like the cookouts, and the church, I was exploring how constructed spaces within my community can be used as a site where behaviors which are not the ‘norm’ may be expressed. Through our weekly conversations and rehearsals, the group as a unit experienced solidarity and an aware conscious. Our conversations consisted of a space where the repetition of painful discussion allowed for a transformative experience. Anzaldua states that,

An addiction (a repetitious act) is a ritual to help one through a trying time; its repetition safeguards the passage, it becomes one’s talisman, one’s touchstone. If it sticks around after having outlived its usefulness, we become “stuck” in it and it takes possession of us. But we need to be arrested. Some past experience or condition has created this need. This stopping is a survival mechanism, but one which must vanish when it’s no longer needed if growth is to occur.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Isasi-Diaz, *En La Lucha*, 4.

<sup>111</sup> Anzaldua, *Borderlands*, 68.



Like Anzaldua's quote, the repetitive act of discussing past experiences and using music as a tool of empowerment became addicting. Needless to say, while the "past experience [and/] or condition has created this need," I hope that the "stuck" is one that can help us reach an alternative culture.<sup>112</sup>

Furthermore, Mi demonstrated that, even though a man (I) facilitated the experience within the ensemble, other spaces can be cultivated to experience solidarity. Such is the guitar ensemble that Mi began on her own will. Nonetheless, her discussions with me about beginning a community ensemble which would allow membership to both women and men, illustrate the need for cultural solidarity. This demonstrated that after all our conversations that occurred through this work's process, made them critically aware about the pain our *comunidad* has. Even so, as the guitar ensemble was set-up in a manner that was meant as a space and time for women to be free from the structures that normally marginalize them, Mi feels that this community ensemble can serve as a transformative experience where women and men can dialogue with each other that may, consequently, create a better culture. These constructed spaces are one solution to begin the process of enabling an alternative culture to be experienced.

Much of my work here has been driven by the inspiration that my mother's will, to always have faith and move forward, has given me. I am where I am because of my community, I am an embodiment of my people, and like them I am looking for an alternative future within my culture. Though I may not know the individual sentiments

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

and thoughts of each person, I am challenging the toxicity of a patriarchal culture, a *machismo* culture. This is our story of oppression. The story of my people's pain and empowerment. In having the opportunity to write about such topics I have interviewed many people in my community, and while it is research, in their words, discussing such topics has been therapeutic to them. Like the responses from the people that have helped author this work, this autoethnographic research has been a catharsis for me as well. Yes, I have lived these experiences and they have passed me by, but I live with them and through this work have perceived, even if temporary, a wholeness to my being.

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